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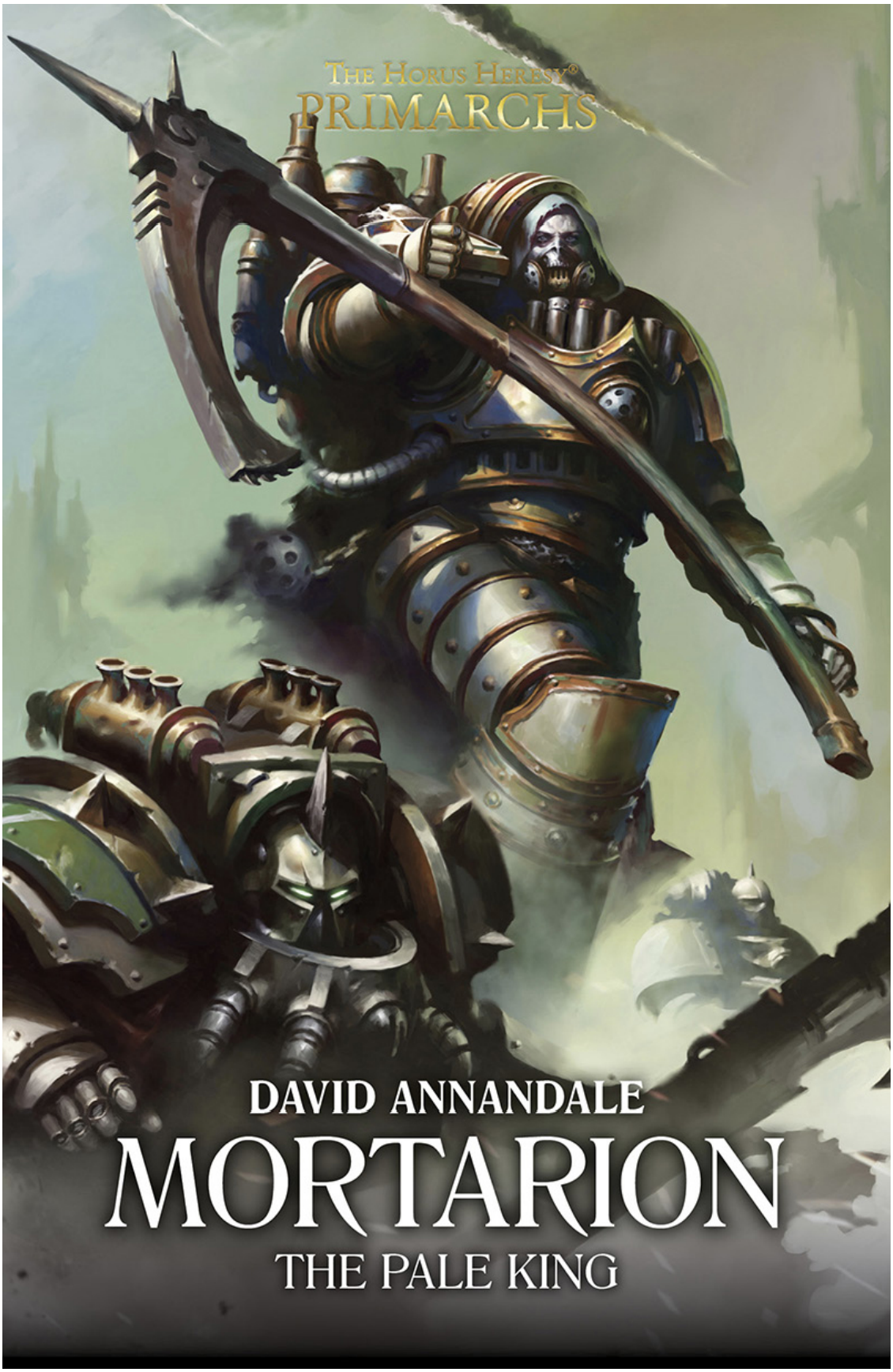
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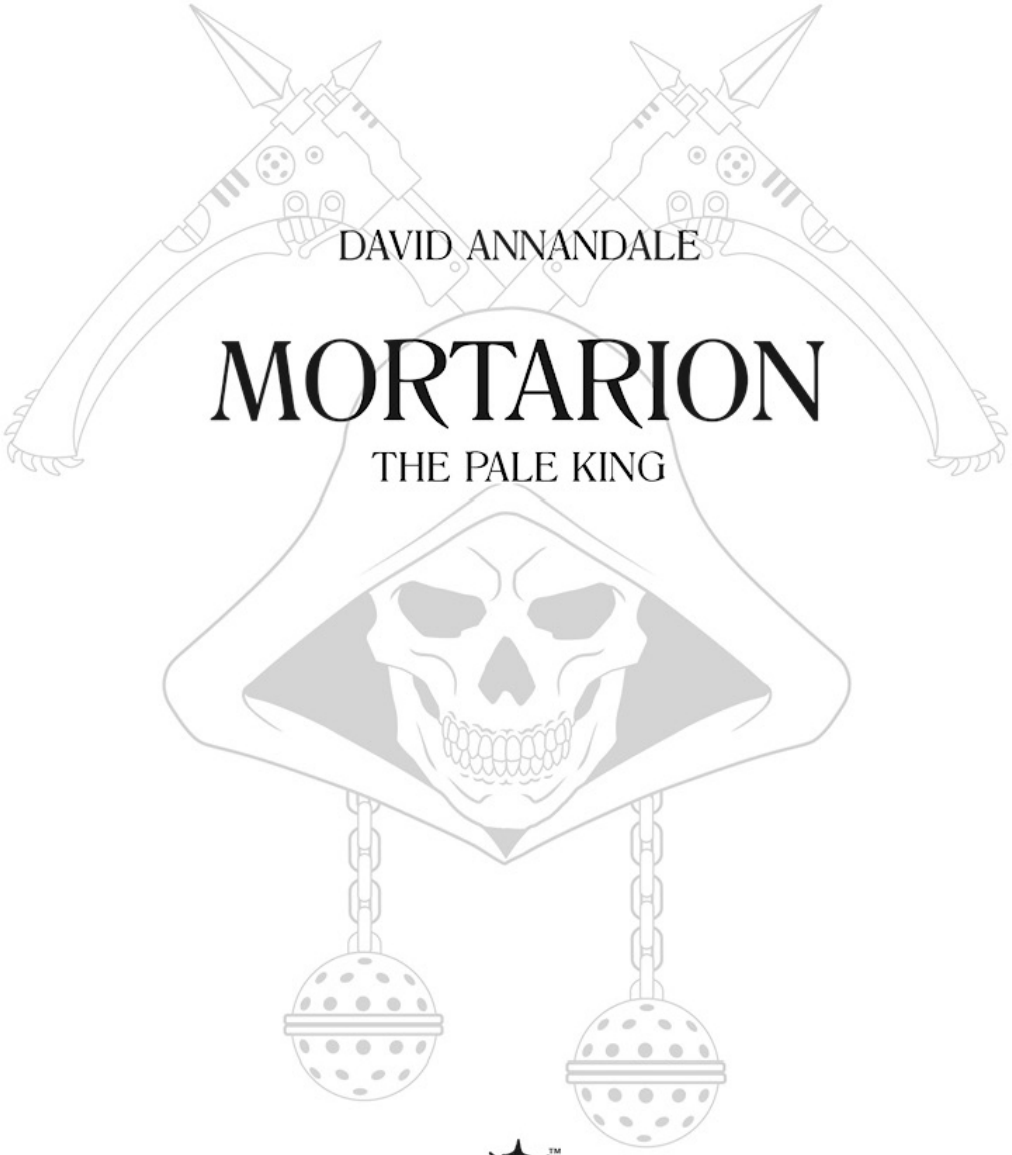

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PROLOGUE

Absyrtus burned. The thick murk of the atmosphere concealed the fire for the moment. The surface was invisible from orbit, and the initial phase of the incineration had begun at a far deeper place. On the command deck of the assault barque *Fourth Horseman*, Mortarion looked down on the planet he had judged. He knew what was happening below, because it was what he had decreed. He would see the fruits of his judgement soon enough.

Absyrtus was burning from the inside out. The *Fourth Horseman* had launched two-stage cyclonic torpedoes. When the missiles struck the surface, their colossal melta charges stabbed through it towards the planet's heart. The torpedoes kept going, down through crust and mantle, the heat of their advance greater than the heat of the world.

Mortarion knew when the torpedoes reached the core. He knew without counting the moments or checking a chrono display. He knew because he was the death of Absyrtus, and the cyclonic torpedoes were the extension of his will, of his arm. He wielded them as fully as he wielded his scythe.

'Now,' he said quietly, announcing the explosions of the cyclonic plasma charges in the core of the planet.

At his side, Cinis nodded, watching in respectful silence for the

manifestation of judgement. The serf was a favoured one, more disciple than servant. She took in all of Mortarion's lessons and taught his precepts to the thousands who laboured for the Legion. Having come from neither Terra nor Barbarus, she symbolised the unity of all aspects of the Death Guard, and her understanding was profound.

Death burst from the centre of Absyrtus. It rose as the core destabilised, and the forces of dissolution struck outward. The crust was the thinnest and most brittle of skins, and it crumbled before the raging cry of the interior. The brief time passed, the time allotted for life on the surface to sense the coming of the end, and to know that it was just.

'And now,' Mortarion said, raising a hand.

In answer to his gesture, the atmosphere flared bright orange, riven by veins of blinding light.

Then the scream came, silent in the void and the distance. Absyrtus blew apart. Through the primary viewing shield, Mortarion watched a tiny sun blaze, the moment of its birth also the moment of its death. And when the light faded from white to glowering red, the fragments of the planet became visible, radiating out like comets, like tears, streaks of fire that trailed tumbling masses, gradually vanishing into the darkness.

'It is done,' said Mortarion. Absyrtus was gone, and so were its crimes. A world devoted to sorcery, it had been beyond saving. 'Tell me,' Mortarion said to Cinis, 'what do you see out there?'

'I see a task well done, my lord,' said Cinis. The right side of her face was a metal reconstruction, and it made her voice reverberate. Her right leg was bionic as well, with no artificial flesh to adorn or disguise its reality. Her arm on that side was a mechadendrite, and she had become adept at coiling its extendable length expressively.

'Do you draw a lesson from it?' Mortarion asked her.

'One of confirmation, my lord,' Cinis answered without hesitation. 'You do what must be done, as ever.'

'As ever,' Mortarion repeated under his breath. Absyrtus had been a trial, and a needed one. He had tried to follow a different path on this planet. He had restrained his force, during the initial landings. He had given its people more of a chance than he would have in the past. At first, it seemed as if Absyrtus would enter compliance easily, and that his experiment with mercy would be a success. But the surrender had been a false one, a

pretence to cover the beliefs its people would never give up.

Mortarion had tried to walk a path urged on him by his brothers. He had been wrong to do so. With the destruction of Absyrtus, he had erased his error, and the doubts that had fed it. ‘We are the Emperor’s scythe,’ he said. ‘To stay our hand is to stay death’s hand. It is unnatural.’

‘If I may speak freely, my lord?’ said Cinis.

‘You may.’

‘You sound…’ Cinis hesitated, searching for the word.

‘I would advise you not to say *content*,’ Mortarion warned. ‘The destruction of Absyrtus is not a joyful act.’ *But then, what is?*

‘There is no joy in death,’ said Cinis, ‘but there is necessity.’

‘And in the recognition of necessity, there is satisfaction. Yes. Go on.’

‘What I was going to say, my lord, is that I sense in you a new form of resolution.’

‘Resolution,’ Mortarion echoed. He grunted, and that was as close to amusement as he ever came. *Resolution, yes. And certainty of a kind.* But along with the certainty, there were doubts and questions. Some had been born a year ago. Some had nestled in his heart for much longer than that, but he had only begun to articulate them then, and they pointed to answers that could not be contemplated. Not yet.

Mortarion looked around the bridge of the *Fourth Horseman*. It was a good ship, and a brutal one. It had served him well, on Galaspar, and the way that it had was a lesson in itself, though he only realised that now.

‘Yes,’ Mortarion said. ‘My resolve has been tested, and sharpened. Absyrtus marks the end of a debate.’

‘With whom, my lord?’

‘With myself. And with others.’ *Debate,* he thought. *There is a misused word.* ‘You were not a witness to the debate itself, Cinis. It began on my return journey to Galaspar.’ His jaw clenched, the anger as fresh as on that day. ‘My return in triumph.’ He spat the words, every syllable coated in venom.

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ONE

A year ago

On the battle-barge Reaper's Scythe

Mortarion strode the halls, and the crew scurried from his path, birds fleeing a storm. He had just returned to the ship, and was making his way from the docking bay to his quarters. He had stopped on the bridge to give terse instructions to the shipmaster, and the *Reaper's Scythe* was making for the new coordinates, leaving the rest of the Death Guard fleet behind. Now, as he walked, silence spread before him, and anxiety drifted in his wake. He was cold anger and the promise of death sweeping through the gloom of the vaulted halls of his flagship. Even his sons knew better than to approach him. They all saw the thunder on his pallid brow, and gave him the solitude his fury commanded.

All of them except Calas Typhon. He had followed Mortarion from the bridge. The primarch was aware of his presence, two steps behind. Typhon was respecting Mortarion's anger, but was also persistent with his presence. Finally, at the door to his quarters, Mortarion stopped and acknowledged the warrior.

‘Ask your question,’ he said. They were alone. Mortarion’s voice echoed off the bone-white pillars that stood like the ribs of a titanic beast down the length of the grand corridor.

‘Why are we heading back to Galaspar, my lord?’ Typhon asked.

‘Because the Emperor wills it.’

Typhon looked baffled. ‘But the conquest is done. Galaspar is compliant.’

‘The lessons we must draw from it are not done.’

Typhon said nothing for a while. His eyes narrowed in thought. They were dark eyes, deep in their hollows under his heavy brow. His mouth was half hidden behind his beard. Typhon kept his own counsel, and there were few who could read him if he did not wish them to.

Finally, he said, ‘I would have thought that we were the ones to teach others the lessons of Galaspar.’

Others. Typhon had guessed well. He had some idea of who might be waiting to meet the *Reaper’s Scythe* on Galaspar. Mortarion wondered how much else he had guessed and was being careful not to say.

He thought of what he could say to Typhon, though he would not. He would not talk about his meeting with his father aboard the *Bucephelus*.

He had never been comfortable aboard his father’s battle-barge. The golden ship was a colossus of glory. It was magnificence wrought of martial power and the artisan’s genius. To walk its halls was to be inside the fullest manifestation of strength and art. Its display was the promise of the Great Crusade, and of the Emperor’s dream for humanity. Mortarion had his part to play in that dream. But as he understood it, and in the form in which he believed in it, that role had little to do with glory. Gold was luxury, and luxury was foreign to Mortarion. It had had no place on Barbarus. There was no luxury in the necessity that drove him.

So, he had not expected laurels when he had come to the *Bucephelus* to meet with his father after his first conquest. He had taken Galaspar because it was necessary, not just for the progress of the Great Crusade, but for himself. He had not taken that fallen empire in the hopes of receiving his father’s praise.

What he had not expected was sorrow.

That surprised him. It confused him.

Did I not do what was asked of me?

The Emperor’s slow nod of the head. The acknowledgement that yes,

Mortarion had fulfilled his task. But those eyes. The eyes of that golden being who was still, in many ways, as much a stranger to Mortarion as when He had first appeared on Barbarus. The eyes that looked at him with sorrow. And with a new commandment.

'Perhaps we are going to deliver a lesson,' Mortarion said to Typhon, knowing that neither of them believed that was true. 'Two of my brothers will be waiting there for us.'

Worlds still burned in the Galaspar Cluster. The embers of the short war sparked and flared, marked by the errant snatches of signals picked up and reported by the vox-officer of the *Reaper's Scythe*. Standing at the command pulpit that jutted from the raised strategium over the centre of the bridge, Mortarion could almost smell the death of the Order's empire in the void. He had passed through the Galaspar Cluster, and the evidence of his passing was everywhere to be found. It was there in those vox fragments, marking the final dissolution of tyranny. It was there in the transponder signals from Imperial ships, freely crossing a region it would have been death to venture into a short time ago.

The signs of his passage were visible too, through the great window of the bridge, as the *Reaper's Scythe* closed in on Galaspar itself. The near space of the planet, far beyond its immediate orbit, was awash with debris. Dark, scorched rubble that had been fortress monitors tumbled past the battle-barge, a silent acknowledgement of Mortarion's work. Some of the wrecks were large enough to be recognisable ghosts of their original shape. A prow went by as Mortarion watched, turning slowly end over end. Further out was a portion of a hull, decking still attached, a cross-section of destruction. Still more of the wreckage no longer had an identity. The pieces were jagged, twisted abstractions. They were all monuments, silent and cold, to the war, and to the sweep of Mortarion's scythe. They were the right and proper lesson of Galaspar. They were the mark of the first great act of the unified Death Guard.

I have done this, and I was right to do it.

'The marks of our journey,' Typhon commented, from a few feet back in the strategium.

'The marks of our accomplishment,' Mortarion said. He did not take pride in the aesthetic perfection of his strategy, as Fulgrim might have. That was

vanity. He was proud of being able to see what was necessary, and of then having carried it out.

As the *Reaper's Scythe* closed in on Galaspar, the number of Imperial ships visible or signalling their approach grew.

'So many arrivals,' said Typhon. 'I trust they're enjoying their smooth passage.'

'They should be grateful,' said Mortarion. *They should be grateful to me, and to my Legion.*

'I remember our first voyage to the planet,' said Typhon. 'It was not smooth.'

I remember the sacrifices. 'It was necessary.'

'Multiple hails, my lord,' the vox-officer called.

'Who from?'

'The *Vengeful Spirit* and the *Red Tear*, my lord.'

'Flagships,' said Typhon. 'Maybe the gathering is an honour?'

Mortarion said nothing.

'A *trial?*' Typhon whispered in disbelief.

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TWO

‘A wasteland,’ said Sanguinius, his tone sorrowful. ‘A wasteland upon a wasteland.’

Horus could not disagree. He and Sanguinius stood together on a ridge of fused wreckage, surveying a plain of annihilation. The rad levels were lethal, the atmosphere poison to a mortal within minutes. The air roiled brown and green, with stagnant layers of oily rainbow colours hovering like floating swamps. Craters overlapped each other. They were surrounded by the mangled remnants of engines of war. There had been tanks on the plain, thousands upon thousands. Their corpses, blackened and torn and melted, had fused with each other, creating a web of congealed metal extending to the horizon.

‘We could almost be looking at a sculpture,’ Sanguinius said softly. ‘Almost a work of art by design. I wonder what Fulgrim would think.’ After a pause, the Angel continued. ‘No, I do not think he would appreciate it.’

For a moment, Horus wondered if Sanguinius might be joking. He glanced at the Angel, and saw the grim set of his mouth, and the frown of concern.

‘A wasteland,’ Sanguinius said again.

‘Worse than the moons of Baal?’ Horus asked.

‘In its way, yes. Those wastes are products of the fallen ages, the mire from which our father is lifting all of us. They are not the work of today, by one of us.’ He pointed behind them. ‘And they are not that kind of work.’

They were a few kilometres from the outer walls of Galaspar’s primary hive. Months after the end of the war, smoke still poured out of the towering arcology. The cone shape of the hive was slumped too, the city deformed by the hammer blow Mortarion had struck. They were on the wrong side of the hive to see the full extent of the damage, but Horus had taken stock of it during the flight down to the surface in the Stormbird *Wolf’s Eye*. The devastation was colossal.

Then there were the mounds of bodies. They were the foothills to the mountain of the hive, some fifteen metres high and more. Rad-suited workers clambered over them, engaged in no task that Horus could identify. New hills were growing as more and more corpses were carried out of the hive by cargo transports or pushed in from the plain by bulldozers.

‘What has he done?’ said Sanguinius.

‘That is what we are here to learn,’ Horus answered.

‘We can already see that this was a massacre.’

‘It has that appearance, granted.’ Horus tried to sound a note of caution.

‘*Appearance?*’

‘Don’t forget the reasons why Mortarion was sent here. The struggle for compliance of the Galaspar Cluster could have been much longer, and much costlier.’

‘I don’t see how it could have been costlier for Galaspar,’ said Sanguinius.

‘Precisely,’ said Horus. ‘We don’t see yet. We cannot prejudge without all the information. And we have only just arrived.’

‘Arrived to see mountains of corpses.’

‘I know,’ said Horus. He grimaced and placed a hand on the Angel’s shoulder. ‘Our judgement must not be rushed, though. I understand the temptation. Believe me, I feel it too. That, I am convinced, is why our father sent us to meet with Mortarion. We can check each other’s first impulses without causing offence.’

‘You think we can check Mortarion’s too?’

‘I don’t know. What I do know is that I want to understand what happened, and why.’ Horus opened his arms to take in the surrounding devastation. ‘This may be the best enforcement of compliance that could possibly have

been achieved, given the nature of the Order.’

‘Do you really believe that?’ Sanguinius asked. When Horus hesitated, he pushed on. ‘Would our father have sent us here if He rejoiced in what has happened?’

‘I know what I am *tempted* to believe,’ said Horus. ‘That is a long way from knowing, and understanding.’

‘You’re right. But it is right, too, that we express what this desolation means to us.’

‘Agreed,’ said Horus. ‘And I think it is good that we have our time to think about that before Mortarion arrives.’

Sanguinius smiled. ‘The better to check our first impulses?’

Horus smiled back. ‘I do think it’s best that we greet him calmly, don’t you?’

‘I think he is unlikely to be in the best frame of mind, being summoned back.’ Sanguinius looked again at the workers swarming over the hills of the dead. ‘What *are* they doing?’ he muttered.

They heard the roar of the Storm Eagle’s engines long before they saw it. The atmosphere was thick as sludge, and the gunship *Finality* came into sight first as a fiery streak in the murk. Clouds burst into flame at its passing. The earth shook beneath the force of its retro rockets as it slowed, coming in for a landing on the prey its master had killed. It landed a short distance from the gunships that had brought the other primarchs.

The ship seemed unadorned compared to those of its brother Legions. The olive-green band of the emblem on its wings made the bone colour of the rest of the hull even more apparent. It was a machine that had been scraped raw. It was, Horus thought, a suitable chariot for his brother, and that saddened him.

The side doors opened, and Mortarion exited, alone. He walked through the fumes and ash of the plain towards the primarchs.

‘Let me greet him first,’ Horus said.

Sanguinius nodded.

Horus strode down the ridge and over the wreckage to meet the lord of the Death Guard.

Mortarion’s armour, the Barbaran Plate, was an artefact that somehow

made brass look not resplendent, but instead the match of the worn bone colour of *Finality*. It was the brass of monuments, of sarcophagi, of the remembrance of things lost. He wore a grey cloak with the hood pulled up over his head, and in its shadow, his features were sharp as a premonition. He was gaunt, hairless, and his eyes were sunken. Deep furrows on his cheeks accentuated the presence of his skull still further, as if his skin were old, tight parchment, a thin veil over the dark reality beneath. He was solemn as a mourning dawn. The lower half of his face was covered by his rebreather. It was of the same grieving brass as his armour. Poisonous gases vented after every exhalation. Mortarion breathed the atmosphere of Galaspar mixed with traces of the noxious air of Barbarus. It was, Horus thought, as if no matter where Mortarion went, he never truly left the toxic world that had nurtured him.

Mortarion's gaze flicked past Horus to Sanguinius, then back again. His eyes glittered with suspicion.

'I rejoice to see you,' Horus said as he drew near.

Mortarion stopped. 'Are you here to welcome me, when it should be me who welcomes you to Galaspar?'

'I'm here to greet you as a brother, and I think you know that. You also know that none of us are laying claim to this or any other world being brought into compliance.' He held out a hand. 'Tell me you're glad to see me too, Mortarion.'

He was glad to see Horus. That much was true, and he stepped forward into the embrace. He broke from it quickly, not from any animosity, but because he disliked the gesture itself. An embrace was a promise of unity and comfort. That made it a promise of illusion. That made it a lie. He knew that Horus didn't look at things that way. That didn't change the truth of things. Horus was lying, only not to Mortarion. He was lying to himself.

Mortarion put much more stock in his ceremony of poison. To share a draught of concentrated toxins with one of his warriors was to acknowledge the reality of their lives. He and his legionaries stood with each other, fought with unity, but never pretended that the ultimate truth of war was anything other than death. In the toast of poisons, there was no promise that could not be kept. It was an acceptance of risk, and of the inevitability of the end.

Mortarion looked past Horus, up the slope of rubble to where the Angel waited. Mortarion was less pleased to see him. Sanguinius was so consumed by the illusion of nobility that Mortarion felt the Angel was perpetually looking down from on high as he circled an unreachable ideal. Why had their father instructed the Angel to come to Galaspar? Why not someone like Perturabo? He might have been an ally. And Sanguinius and Horus were so close. Mortarion felt a bond with Horus, but he knew it was not as strong as the one that joined Horus to the Angel. He was facing a united front, whether or not the other two would admit it, even to themselves.

'Well,' he said to Horus. 'Am I here to account for myself?'

'You are,' said Horus. 'It gives me no pleasure to say that.'

'It gives me still less to hear it,' Mortarion snapped.

He marched up the rubble to the Angel. 'Sanguinius,' he said, his voice flat and cold. 'So?' he asked his brothers. 'What is it that you think I have done here?'

'It isn't a question of what we think,' said Sanguinius. 'Or at least, it shouldn't be.'

'We've come to listen, not just to observe,' said Horus. 'We've come to understand.'

'Don't condescend to me, Horus,' Mortarion said. 'I thought you were better than that.'

'I'm not condescending. If I ever do, I'm wrong, and I should be shown my error. But I meant exactly what I said, brother. I need to understand what has happened here. We both do.'

'You speak as if the outcome of the war were a mystery. I came here to bring Galaspar into compliance. I succeeded.'

'Galaspar is unprecedented,' said Sanguinius. 'It is unlike other compliance campaigns.'

'There we agree,' Mortarion told him.

'There must, therefore, be much to be learnt from it.' Sanguinius paused significantly. 'For *all* of us.'

Do you think you are being subtle, Sanguinius? I hope not. 'I am *quite* willing to help you understand,' Mortarion said. He bit off each syllable, staring coldly at the Angel.

Sanguinius stared right back. 'Help me understand this, then,' he said. He

pointed to one of the hills of corpses. ‘Those mortals, for instance. What are they doing?’

‘They are tallying the dead of the Order,’ said Mortarion.

‘Why?’

‘Because I commanded it.’

Sanguinius shook his head. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Horus stepped in.

‘This is precisely what we are here to learn,’ Horus said. He nodded to Sanguinius, who shrugged, letting his objections go for the time being. ‘We have questions about the campaign, and about what you have left behind. Clarity will help us. You too, Mortarion.’

‘I believe in clarity,’ Mortarion told him, still speaking in a measured, cold monotone.

‘Then you will help us understand?’

‘I will.’ Despite his defensiveness, he felt a certain eagerness. Yes, they *should* understand. Yes, they *should* see the full truth of Galaspar. Let them judge him after that. Perhaps their father would see more clearly too. ‘I have nothing to hide.’

‘We don’t mean to imply you do,’ said Horus.

‘It’s not your honesty that concerns us,’ said Sanguinius.

‘What then, my judgement?’

‘Precisely.’

They looked at each other in silence. Horus finally broke it. ‘It would be helpful,’ he said, ‘if our remembrancers had the opportunity to speak with some of the members of the Order. Where are the prisoners kept?’

‘There are none,’ said Mortarion.

‘You released them?’ Horus asked, startled.

Mortarion snorted. ‘Of course not. There are no prisoners because no one from the Order was left alive.’

‘You killed them all,’ said Sanguinius, apparently finding it necessary to state the obvious.

‘Yes.’

Mortarion’s affirmation fell into another silence. It lasted long enough for his brothers to look uneasy.

‘The Order kept records,’ Mortarion said, ignoring the discomfort. ‘Its archives are prodigious. The ones that survived the war are preserved. I

trust that will provide you with what you need.’

‘It will,’ Horus said.

‘We may hold this council aboard the *Reaper’s Scythe* if you prefer,’ said Sanguinius, sounding sympathetic now. The look in his eyes reminded Mortarion of their father’s sorrow, and he did not like it.

‘No,’ Mortarion said. He pointed to the ruined hive. ‘Let our *understanding* be conducted there. That is where the battle on Galaspar began, and where it was decided. Go there, my brothers. See all that there is to see. You want to know how I conducted the war and why? Then you shall.’

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THREE

Mortarion showed his brothers Galaspar as it was. If its present distressed them, then he would make them look at its past. He brought the other primarchs to the highest spire of the primary hive, Protarkos. Contained in its peak was the master command centre. It was a shell of what it had been. A few wires hung from what remained of the ceiling, barely a reminder of the all-seeing nerve centre that had controlled thirty billion lives on the empire's home planet alone. The floor was cracked, and the ceiling had melted, leaving the chamber exposed to the poisoned wind.

At a nod from Mortarion, tech-adepts conjured up the past of Galaspar. They raised it by means of a dozen servo-skulls feeding vid- and pict-feeds to the screens that still worked in the ruined panopticon. The servo-skulls had access to the archives of the Order. These were records in every medium, redundancies and duplications, documents beyond counting, the minutiae of the tyrants outliving their empire. The archives were a self-portrait of a civilisation in lethal stagnation, and Mortarion had ordered them preserved. The portrait would remain to condemn the subject long after its destruction.

The primarchs gathered around the screens, taking in the streams of

images and sounds and data, the world that was taking shape in their minds.

‘This is what reigned here,’ Mortarion said. ‘This is what I came to destroy.’

The servo-skulls followed the commands of the primarchs in their presentation of the archive data. The nature of Galaspar under the Order appeared in broad strokes at first and then in finer grains of suffering.

Galaspar, from orbit, was a dirty brown ball, its atmosphere sluggish with particulates, the clouds sulphurous with industrial waste. Beneath the clouds, it was a world without oceans, without arable land. Open water and greenery were not even myths any longer, their existence forgotten, their deaths unmourned. The air was nothing but a wealth of poisons. The land was cracked bedrock, heaped with detritus gathered around the hives, a growing topography of filth.

Breathing the air of Galaspar was a death sentence. The planet had been uninhabitable for centuries, yet it was populated by thirty billion souls, crammed into the arcologies that covered the surface like volcanic cones.

The hives climbed high, their peaks cutting into the sludge of the clouds. There were no windows in their outer walls. It had been centuries since an inhabitant of the planet other than the elite had looked out at the landscape. The hives enclosed the bodies of the people of Galaspar. The Order enclosed their minds.

Inside the peaks, the masters of the empire thrived. There was wealth on the planet. There was luxury. The hierarchy of the Order was precise, and as inflexible in its lines as a pyramid. The largest and grandest living spaces, and the greatest wealth, belonged to those with the most power. This was not just the inevitable result of the unequal distribution of power. It was also the law.

If there had been an ideology that originally drove the formation of the Order, a system of belief that justified the shape of the empire and draped that shape in the robes of something that pretended to be a morality, it was as forgotten as the world’s oceans. No one remembered how the Order had developed, how it had come to power, and what it might once have represented. Even its rulers’ obsessively compiled records did not go back that far. The Order had become a perfect tautology of force. Those who were in power were there because they were. Their rights could not be questioned, because the concept of rights was alien to Galaspar.

Property, though, was not. Property on the planet could not be defined as a *right* any more than a stone could be said to have a right to be hard. Property was an absolute. It reigned supreme. It was codified and regulated by a bureaucracy that existed only to perpetuate itself and the structures that supported it.

The comptrollers of the Order were the lords at the top of the pyramids. They dwelt in the peaks of the hives, in chambers marked by rectilinear luxury.

‘I see that the conception of art is extinct on Galaspar,’ said Sanguinius.

There were no statues or paintings, no frescos or jewels to ornament the halls of the comptrollers. Art existed beyond the categorisations and measurements of the bureaucrat. It could not be fully contained by units of use value, and so had, over the centuries, vanished from the imagination of the Order. It had been ignored until it had been forgotten.

Mortarion grunted. This was not an absence that concerned him. There was no art on Barbarus either. There had been no space for it to develop in the brutal, miserable existence of its human population. It was not the lack of culture that brought back his anger when he thought of the Order. ‘Art is a luxury,’ he said. ‘There is no room for luxury between the true exigencies of life and death. No doubt you disagree.’ The brief glance he gave Sanguinius was meant to convey that he was not interested in the Angel’s disagreement.

Sanguinius said nothing.

‘The Order did, however, have luxury,’ Mortarion said, his voice a low growl.

Luxury on Galaspar was measurable. It was defined by the area of floors and by the height of ceilings. It was defined by the size of beds. It was defined by the quantity of food and clothing. And most of all, it was defined by the numbers of labour units that were the direct property of each comptroller. Those were the means of creating more wealth, and more power. The management of those means was demanding. There was no leisure time on Galaspar, even for the High Comptrollers. They lived to perpetuate their own power, and that power existed only for its own continuity.

‘Labour units,’ said Horus, repeating the nomenclature given to the civilians by the Order.

‘Slaves,’ said Mortarion. ‘Perceived as numbers and nothing else. See them. *See them.* Beneath the peaks occupied by the comptrollers were hundreds of levels of administrative functionaries. The millions who laboured here gave the Order its character. This was bureaucracy in full, rotten bloom.’ He called up footage of low-ceilinged warehouses, each as anonymously grey as the others. ‘There,’ he said, ‘grids of work stations. The functionaries’ lives had no definition other than eternal monotony. Directives descended from above, the edicts split and subdivided as they trickled through the hierarchy, and tasks were delegated into so many fragments that none of them had any perceptible meaning by the time they were carried out. At the end of one chain, a worker’s duty might be to strike out, with a stylus, every third line of items on a long parchment they could not read. They drew line after line, for hour after hour, day after day, without comprehension, and without curiosity.

‘It was here, in this strata of the functionaries, where the chemical dependencies began.’ He spoke calmly, coldly, delineating the horrors of the Order with a merciless clarity. ‘The mandated drug dosages were much less than on the levels below, though they were ubiquitous. The pills were required consumption with the food allotment before every eighteen-hour shift. They numbed the senses – not enough to render the workers useless, but enough to keep them docile. They stood at their stations, their awareness unable to extend beyond their immediate tasks. They could not think ahead. They could not imagine a future, let alone a rebellion. The Order was their entire existence. They did what was required, and that was the totality of their lives. They enacted what was dictated, and below them, pieces moved.’

Mortarion hissed in disgust. ‘Pieces moved below them,’ he said, ‘and the functionaries who could write produced the reports of those movements. Power was exercised, and its exercise was recorded, an infinitely repeated loop of the dull, the banal and the unvarying.

‘Now look below the unceasing scribbles of the bureaucracy. Look upon the impact of every scratched figure and every certified edict. With each line crossed out, people died. With every dull action above, suffering happened below. Here, the full misery of the Order held sway. Beneath the millions were the billions. The labour units. The items whose movements, dispositions, assignments and distributions were controlled by the transfer

up and down of parchment and its modifications by stylus.

‘The billions existed in the lower, broader halves of the hive spires. I say *existed*. They could not be said to have *lived*. When they slept, they curled into tiny alcoves in the walls, larvae in a honeycomb, or piled one on top of the other in overcrowded holding tanks that stank of sweat and grime and suffering.’

‘They were like ants,’ said Horus.

‘They were worse,’ Mortarion told him. ‘Ants labour for a purpose. They are a collective. These people were not even maggots. They did not even have the freedom to feast on the carrion of the planet. They were lower than any insect. They were property.’

The labour units had toiled for every conscious hour in the fume-choked manufactoria of Galaspar. The manufactoria produced the building materials of the hive. They made the clothing for the people, from the unvarying sackcloth tunics of the lowly to the silken robes of the comptrollers. They churned out the furniture of luxury. They produced far more than could be used. Much of what was made by one manufactorum would be catalogued for reports, then transported to another plant where it would be broken down and expelled onto the mountains of waste outside the hives.

‘Now look here,’ Mortarion said.

Security vid footage of a manufactorum appeared on the screens.

The workers depicted had slaved themselves to the gigantic machines, flies on a behemoth of the fields. The footage focused on the output of the machine. From its maw came a stream of viscous grey sludge. A conveyor belt carried heavy iron containers slowly past the vomiting maw. The containers filled up with the sludge, then moved on into another chamber of the manufactorum. The containers were not perfectly centred on the conveyor. The spewing liquid hit the interior walls of some of them so hard that they jerked and shifted violently. One toppled off the belt. It came down on the manufactorum floor, spilling its contents into a grey mire that the workers waded through with difficulty. Beneath the container, five of the Order’s slaves lay dead, crushed by its weight.

Lifting engines crawled in, raised the container and moved it back onto the belt to go past the maw a second time.

A voice blared from vox-casters mounted on the walls. ‘*Ineffective labour*

units warning. Remove all inoperative units immediately.'

Other workers struggled over to the dead and dragged them away. The bodies wiggled strangely as they were moved, their bones smashed to powder.

'The labourers' eyes are unfocused,' Horus noted.

'Chemically enforced docility,' said Mortarion. 'Much larger doses than on the higher levels. These people were barely more sentient than servitors.'

The workers' movements were sluggish, imprecise. Hunger, misery and chemical stupor made them prone to accidents, and the vid-feeds were full of industrial carnage. The accidents were even more common because of the enforcers. Uniformed overseers urged the slaves on to greater speed with whips and shock batons. The petty tyrants revelled in the fragments of authority that the structure of the Order conveyed upon them. There was no need to control them through chemical measures, though the measures were there. Instead of sedatives, they were on aggression drugs, ecstatic with violence and cruelty. They laid into the human cattle around them with blood-soaked fervour.

Another vid-feed showed where the dead were taken.

'Is this a different chamber?' Sanguinius asked.

'It is the other end of the same machine,' said Mortarion.

In yet another warehouse-sized chamber of the manufactorum was a series of immense mulching engines. Workers on an elevated platform tossed the corpses into a funnel whose sides were encrusted with dried blood. There were no guard rails around the mouth of the funnel, in order to speed up the process of disposal. The platform was slippery, painted wet as a slaughterhouse floor, and other labour units regularly lost their footing and fell into the funnel and the grinding mechanism inside. Their screams were the only emotions they ever had the power to express.

The bodies went into just one of the funnels. Into the others flowed offal and waste from the hive. Heavy pipes pumped in other raw organic material, along with chemical sedatives.

'The food of the masses,' said Mortarion.

'The sludge?' Sanguinius asked.

'Yes. Made in plants like these and distributed through the hive. Much of it coming right back, one way or another, to be remade again.'

'This is not our father's dream,' Sanguinius said in disgust.

‘This is what I came to stop,’ Mortarion told him. The screens went black. ‘That was the past of Galaspar.’ Just watching the records again revived Mortarion’s hatred for the Order. Perhaps his brothers saw more clearly now why it was necessary to act as he did. Perhaps they didn’t. The fault was theirs if they did not. For Mortarion, the truth was limpid. ‘Galaspar called the blade upon itself,’ he said.

‘Then it is time we saw how your blade fell,’ said Horus.

‘Very well.’

Mortarion called up other records. *You say you want to understand. I shall show you all.* He began to tell them.

He began before his arrival at Galaspar. He began with how he came to realise what his first command in the Great Crusade must be.

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FOUR

The watch supervisor in the signals centre of Protarkos was a middle-aged woman. She wore the same olive-green uniform, and had her hair cut to the same stubble, as all the signals operators under her command. Her position in the hierarchy was marked by the symbols on her lapel, and by her position in the operations room. Her station was on a high column in the centre of the back wall. All the other stations surrounded the platform in concentric semicircles. She could see all her underlings at a glance. They could all feel her eyes on them.

She spoke with the chief comptroller of the Defence Directorate. An event had taken place that she hadn't the required authority to respond to.

'We have received signals from the edge of the primary system, chief comptroller,' she said. 'They are a message beamed directly to Galaspar.'

'Replay the message.'

'"Greetings from the Imperium of Man. We come to reunite with you. Freedom awaits your compliance with the rule of the Emperor."'

There was a pause. Static crackled on the recording.

'Is there to be an answer?' Even if she knew what it would be, the decision was not, and never would be, hers to make. The instruction had to come

from the correct position in the Order's hierarchy. To break the chain of command, in even the most trivial fashion, was a crime punished by death. Without the Order, there was only chaos.

'Answer the following. "The Galaspar Cluster is under the protection of the Order. You have no authorisation to enter its space. Depart or be destroyed." Repeat what I have said.'

The supervisor did so, word for word.

On the bridge of the exploratory ship *Manifest Unity*, Captain Havas Evesen paced back and forth in front of the primary oculus. The *Manifest Unity* had entered the Order's space more than an hour before. It was making for Galaspar, its message from the Imperium on repeated loop.

'Captain,' said the auspex officer. 'Movement.'

'Analysis?'

'A vessel, mass equivalent to a battle cruiser, on an intercept course. No other details.'

'Vox?' Evesen asked.

'No further transmissions since the original response to our message, captain. Our sister ships in the other systems report the same.'

'Signal the approaching ship. Insist on Imperial authority, demand that it identify itself and its intent.' Evesen cursed under his breath. 'Battle stations,' he said.

Alarms blared, and the *Manifest Unity* prepared for war. It was a preparation that made Evesen uneasy. The *Unity* had defences. It had guns, and it had shields. But its function was to present a diplomatic first contact from the Imperium. It came to announce to the scattered outposts of humanity the good news of the Great Crusade. Conquest was not in its remit. It was not a warship.

The ship had been ready for battle for more than an hour when the first of the Galaspar vessels came into range. By then, Evesen was no longer pacing. He was staring forward into the void, hands clasping and unclasping behind his back.

'Target acquired,' said the auspex officer. Weapons-ready signals rang across the firing stations.

Evesen's hands closed around each other. His frame vibrated with the agony of the moment. To fire the first shot would be to ensure that the

Galaspar Cluster would have to be brought to compliance through war. And the other ship was massive.

We can't win. And if we fire first, this mission will have failed.

So, he held back on the command.

'Incoming fire!' the auspex officer yelled.

In the moment before the torpedoes hit, Evesen had a brief glimpse, through the oculus, of something enormous blotting out the stars. Then the impacts came. A swarm of torpedoes struck the ship, their numbers overwhelming its shields. Evesen felt the defences crumble before the shield officer called out the warning, and he knew the vessel was lost.

Then the bridge was bathed in flame, and the void came for him.

The Hall of the Grand Assembly of the Comptrollers of the Order was in the peak of its own spire in Protarkos. It was a great amphitheatre of luxurious space and oppressively symmetrical geometry. The ceiling was twenty metres high. On the platform at the front was a long table, at which sat the High Comptrollers, each exercising absolute control over one of the enslaved worlds of the Galaspar Cluster. At the centre, standing at a lectern, the Lord Comptroller, Avald Stevang, spoke to the Assembly.

'It has been centuries since our sovereign space has been challenged by an outsider. Today, we saw the wisdom of maintaining our eternal strength. An invader came and was destroyed. So will and must it ever be. Our way of life will not be challenged. It is unchanging. Our freedom will be preserved. It is undying. Where in the galaxy is the force that can defeat us? It does not exist. The Order is the greatest and most perfect of all empires. Those who know of us can only look at us with envy, and wish for our enlightened guidance. Those who dare to stand against us will fall, because perfection cannot be defeated.'

The comptrollers rose as one, their applause thunderous and regular as the rapid beat of a metronome.

'All is Order!' shouted Stevang.

'*ALL IS ORDER!*' roared the comptrollers.

Mortarion didn't learn what had happened at Galaspar all at once. The reports filtered through gradually, the news reaching the lords militant first, and then spreading out through the arms of the Great Crusade. He did not

take immediate interest, either. He heard of the loss of the explorator *Manifest Unity*, but the incident did not appear to have any particular importance to him, and he thought no more about it as he continued the fleet exercises intended to cement the union of the Terran and Barbaran portions of the XIV Legion.

Then further reports came, of the other ships destroyed, and of the subsequent missions that were attacked. Mortarion paid more attention then. In the years that would follow, when he thought about these days, it would seem to him that it must have been a premonition that made him look to Galaspar and become eager for news from the cluster.

It was the knowledge sent back by the spy ships and the infiltration missions that turned the system from a subject of interest to an obsession. The reports did not have all the detail he would have wished, but they were clear enough. They showed just how formidable the military disposition of the Order was. More importantly, they revealed the nature of the empire. Mortarion saw the slavery. He saw the absolute tyranny, and how it was based on nothing but its own power, and the conviction that the ruled belonged to the rulers.

As he watched and rewatched the brief, fragmentary recordings of humans reduced to chattel on a toxic world, the memories of Barbarus, never far from his mind, grew clamorous. Memories of the people in misery, the playthings of the Overlords. They could not fight their oppressors. They did not have the strength even to begin to dream of resistance. They fought, yes. They fought to stay alive. And they failed, always. They survived only at the pleasure of Barbarus' masters, and the pleasure of the Overlords was not just the slaughter of humans, but the terror of those who were allowed to live another day.

Terror. For a long time, Mortarion did not understand what terror was. He couldn't, having been raised by nightmares to be one himself. His adoptive father had raised him in a keep high in the mountains, shrouded in the toxic clouds of the altitudes, surrounded by battlements of iron and of stone that suppurated constantly, as if crying slow, ironic tears for the horrors visited on the lowlands. Even so, it took him longer than it should have, he felt, to be curious about the beings who were, after all, the same species as him. He did not see their terror until he came down from the mountains, abandoning his monstrous father to the creature's internecine wars of petty gods.

When he saw the world as a human did, instead of as the son of an Overlord, he saw the full scale of the crimes. It wasn't enough to harvest the humans for play or raw materials according to perverse whims. They had to be attacked by beings drawn from their deepest nightmares. Their loved ones died, and then came back. Shambling assemblages of corpses, stitched together with wire; butchered and mutilated flesh reanimated and turned into mindless killers, returned to harvest anew. The monsters were just recognisable enough for the victims to know what was attacking them. The people despaired before they died, and they died knowing the unlife that they might suffer.

A fine game for the Overlords, to shatter the minds and the spirits of the humans with the force of every nightmare.

The humans were slaves in every possible way. When Mortarion saw that, when he finally, truly understood the full measure of their oppression, that was when he also understood the way to end it. For humanity to be freed, its oppressors must die. The solution was simple to state. Its simplicity masked how profound its implications were. Protecting the people from the Overlords was insufficient. The fear of their return would always be there. But if the tyrants were dead, they could not return.

With every Overlord he killed, Mortarion freed Barbarus a little more. When the people saw that even nightmares could die, they fought with real hope at last, and Mortarion gave them the means and the skills to give their struggle true force. His mission became more and more clear. He would free Barbarus through cleansing destruction, killing the Overlords until not a single one of them remained.

That was his mission, and he had left it unfinished. He had failed to kill his adoptive father. His other father completed the task instead.

The shame still rankled.

And now, after Barbarus, after he had brought together the Barbaran and Terran halves of the Death Guard, when he was still waiting for his first task in the Great Crusade, there came the news of Galaspar. The tyrants of that empire were not the same as the ones on Barbarus. They were human, and the details of their tyranny were different. Those differences were unimportant. What Mortarion saw was the totality of the oppression. Mind and body, the masses were crushed by the comptrollers of the Order.

So, the Order must be destroyed.

This was his mission. He would complete it. The annihilation would be total.

He saw the broad lines of his strategy at once. A siege was out of the question. The Order needed to be taken out in a single, decapitating blow. He had to punch through the Galaspar System's defences with brutal speed. That would require more than the conventional strength of his fleet. He needed raw, expendable force. He needed sheer mass.

He thought about asteroids, harvested from dense planetoid belts to be propelled by crude engines at the head of the fleet. He thought about fireships, salvaged from the wrecking yards for a final mission. And he thought about the *Fourth Horseman*, and what, with the right modifications, the assault barque would be able to do.

The preparations would take time. But every month that went into the preparation of his fleet would be made up in the brutal speed of the campaign itself.

The siegemaster of the Death Guard greeted the captains of the First and Seventh Great Companies as they exited the loading bay of the *Fourth Horseman*.

'First Captain, battle-captain,' Marshal Artur Corrius said to Antavus Barrazin and Vellian Tersus. His head was shaven, and though Terran-born like Barrazin and Tersus, he had the same bone-pallor as many of the other Barbaran legionaries. 'A good exercise. It went well, I think.'

'I agree,' said Barrazin. 'So, you're to show us some of the modifications to the assault barque?'

Corrius nodded and led the way down the stark corridor. It was wide and high, and ran down the spine of the ship. Like the rest of the *Fourth Horseman*, it was unadorned. Its function was to deliver legionaries quickly and in vast numbers to the stations at which they would act as agents of death.

'I have had the privilege of being on the ship during most of the work,' Corrius said, 'and to have seen Lord Mortarion's conceptions take shape.' He turned to port at the first major intersection and led them into one of the gun bays. Tech-priests and their adepts in the hundreds were hard at work over the inner walls of the hall. Scaffolding went up the full eighteen metres, to where the walls curved inward to form the half-arch of the

ceiling. Legionaries from both companies inspected the guns and familiarised themselves with the new configurations of the ship.

‘Reinforcing the shields,’ Tersus noted.

‘By quite a bit,’ said Barrazin.

‘Yes,’ Corrius said. ‘And not just the shields. There has been a full inspection of all structural supports. Much is being done, too, with the arrest-thrusters.’

‘Then I perceive a pattern,’ said Barrazin.

‘Of what sort?’ Tersus asked.

‘Tell me this, first. What did you think of the fleet manoeuvres we just completed?’

‘They were unusual,’ Tersus said. ‘They were unlike anything I’ve done before, as a Death Guard or as a Dusk Raider.’

Tersus couldn’t entirely keep the hints of fondness and loss from his voice when he used the XIV’s old name. Barrazin caught the nostalgia but did not respond to it. ‘They were unusual,’ he agreed. ‘So, they must have had a precise purpose. So must the readying of the *Fourth Horseman*.’

‘What would that purpose be?’ Corrius asked.

‘Lord Mortarion has a campaign in mind.’

‘Where? There hasn’t even been a rumour of our deployment yet.’

‘It has to come soon,’ said Barrazin. ‘No son of the Emperor will remain idle long.’

‘But where?’ Corrius insisted.

‘I don’t know. But the modifications and the exercise are too specific for there not to be a particular task in mind.’

Above, the flare of multiple plasma cutters flashed like heat lightning.

Tersus was frowning. ‘I’m trying to picture what that task could be.’

‘You sound uneasy,’ said Corrius.

‘Not uneasy.’ Tersus shrugged. ‘Puzzled. Did you notice that there was really no defensive posture to the formation we took at all?’

‘That is not entirely true,’ said Barrazin.

‘You’re right. Insofar as there was one, its goal was, as far as I could tell, to prioritise the *Fourth Horseman* reaching its target.’

‘Strike hard enough, and you will have no need of defence.’

‘How often does that happen in battle?’ Tersus asked.

A few metres away, a legionary of the First Great Company turned and

saluted, fist on chest. ‘Your pardon, my lieges,’ he said.

Barrazin turned to him. ‘Is there something you would like to add, Legionary Typhon?’

‘I mean no disrespect, First Captain.’

‘Understood. I would hear what you have to say. Speak freely.’

‘Captains, marshal, again, I mean no slight, but you are Terran,’ said Typhon. ‘If you had lived on Barbarus, you would know that such battles did happen. Every day. Attack without defence was all we had when there was no defence. And attempts at defence never worked. The only way to survive was to strike first.’ He paused, then corrected himself. ‘That is, we could survive once Lord Mortarion was with us, and showed us we could win. Before his coming, if you were going to die anyway, it was better to die on the offensive. There was always the dream you might take an enemy with you.’ He grimaced at dark memories. ‘Though, in truth, I am not sure we even had dreams before Lord Mortarion was among us.’

‘You have told me that he gave you the gift of dreams,’ said Barrazin.

‘That is so. Dreams of the slaughter of the foe. And he taught us how to attack so that defence really didn’t matter. Who needs defence when the enemy is dead? Do you understand?’

‘I do,’ said Tersus. ‘The Fourteenth has always been fatalistic, but I’ll grant you had a more intimate association with fatalism on Barbarus.’

‘We had no choice,’ said Typhon.

‘I’ll promise you this,’ Barrazin said, eyeing the work and imagining just how brutal a weapon the already formidable *Fourth Horseman* was becoming, ‘wherever we are going now, it is the enemy who has no chance.’

In the communications hall of the *Reaper’s Scythe*, Mortarion stepped up onto the hololithic plate of the lithocast system. The hall was dark, except for a faint glow coming from the work stations of the tech-adept operators. Mortarion nodded, and the lithocast came to life. Light sparked, shimmered and surrounded Mortarion with the image of an assembly chamber. Only a slight flicker gave away the illusion. A massive golden aquila on a black wall spread its wings over the table around which were gathered the lords militant. Each of them was also lithocasting from their own location, and the system recreated their images inside the chamber, which was itself an

illusory construct. The simulation of reality was real enough for the purposes of the gathering, and Mortarion's presence was enough to awe the lords militant. They bowed to him when he appeared. He stood at one end of the table, watching in silence as, at the far end, Lord Trevent of the Imperial Army summarised the situation in the Galaspar Cluster. Beside him, the simulation of a pict screen displayed a map of the pocket empire.

'What forces do we have in the region?' asked Lord Avissa Briteen. As soon as she spoke, the display beside Trevent changed to show the sector. Labels shimmered over conflicts.

'Not enough available to launch an attack on Galaspar,' said Trevent. He pointed to the display. 'The Twenty-Second and Eleventh Crusade fleets are fully engaged against the orks of Vulga Kar. The fight is a hard one. It will be won, but not easily.'

You mean the fleets are bogged down against the greenskin empire and you're worried about the outcome, Mortarion thought.

'What about the White Scars?' Lord Paranthial asked.

'The Fifth Legion pursues the fra'al sistrum with Battle Group Gorgon Five,' said Trevent. 'To retask it at this juncture would be disastrous, and risk a victory for which much has been sacrificed.'

'We can't let Galaspar go unchecked, though, given the attack on an Imperial vessel,' said Paranthial.

'I agree,' said Briteen. 'And that's without even considering Galaspar's strategic position. It's already a potential obstacle to mustering forces in the Vasalius region. Should the Order become expansionist, then we have a new point of vulnerability.'

'The Order does not appear to have warp travel capability, at least for now,' Trevent replied. 'There is no dispute whatsoever, though, about its strategic position. Galaspar cannot be ignored, but we cannot muster, at present, the forces needed for the kind of prolonged siege required to break through the Order's defences. A blockade would seem to be our only option.'

'A blockade,' Mortarion repeated.

The lords militant turned to look at him, which they had all been avoiding doing until now. Even his image was making them uncomfortable.

'Yes,' said Trevent. 'At least Galaspar will be contained.'

'Contained,' Mortarion echoed him again with cold contempt. 'And when

will the Imperium deal with the Order?’

‘When the forces can be spared,’ said Trevent.

Mortarion replied with silence and a terrible stillness.

Trevent visibly squirmed. ‘This will be a long struggle. It is unfortunate, but it is also the reality of the situation.’

‘A long struggle,’ Mortarion said, as if repeating Trevent’s words was the only way he could bring himself to believe they had been uttered. ‘A convenient euphemism for *delay.* Meanwhile, the people of Galaspar suffer under that tyranny.’

‘They have been for centuries,’ said Briteen. ‘A short time longer, comparatively, won’t matter.’

‘By comparatively,’ said Mortarion, ‘you mean it could be years.’

Trevent started to raise a placating hand, then thought better of it, reacting as though Mortarion were really in the same room with him. ‘That is not our intent,’ he said.

‘But it is your expectation.’

Trevent grimaced. ‘The complexities of the Great Crusade do get in the way of the solutions we would prefer at the level of specific systems or clusters.’

Mortarion said nothing.

‘You wished to be in attendance, Lord Mortarion,’ Trevent said, clearly trying to muster more authority than he felt in the moment. ‘Do you have anything to suggest?’

‘Yes,’ said Mortarion. ‘That we do not wait years. That we destroy the obscenity of the Order without a moment’s delay.’

‘We would all like to see that,’ said Paranthial.

‘Good. Then the Death Guard will liberate Galaspar.’

‘The nature of the Fourteenth’s first campaign is still under discussion,’ Trevent said after a moment’s hesitation. And then, after a longer one, he added, ‘You do not have the authority, Lord Mortarion, to decide what that is.’

Mortarion grunted. ‘You think not?’

‘Of course, if the Emperor decrees it–’

Mortarion cut Trevent off. ‘He has. There will be no need for a blockade. I will bring Galaspar into immediate compliance. I have already begun the preparations to do so.’ He had done the lords militant the courtesy of

listening to their plans for the cluster to see if, by strange chance, the salvation of Galaspar would come before he could be ready. It would not. The solutions of the lords militant were as pointless as he had expected.

‘No blockade,’ Trevent repeated in disbelief. ‘That is an ambitious claim. How do you intend to accomplish that goal?’

‘With the sweep of a scythe.’

‘What does that entail, Lord Mortarion?’ Paranthial asked.

‘A sudden, decisive and overwhelming blow to the heart of the Galaspar System. My fleet will drive through the defences and take Galaspar too quickly for the Order to bring its might to bear.’

‘I will not presume to lecture Lord Mortarion on tactics,’ Paranthial began.

‘Then don’t,’ said Mortarion.

‘But not all circumstances allow for so…’ He drew a breath, clearly searching for a less insulting word than *simplistic*. ‘So direct a strategy.’

‘This is the *only* strategy that will work in the Galaspar Cluster,’ Mortarion said.

‘The defences of the Order are formidable,’ said Paranthial.

‘They will be irrelevant.’

Two hours later, in the strategium of the *Fourth Horseman*, Mortarion unveiled the campaign to the captains of his Great Companies. The chamber, positioned above and to the immediate rear of the bridge, was bare except for the hololithic table that dominated its centre. It was as functional and unadorned as a weapons bay, and almost as big.

‘There are eleven primary stars in the empire,’ Mortarion said. ‘We shall ignore all the worlds except one. Galaspar is the centre of all control. Without it, the Order’s empire cannot stand.’ As he spoke, the hololithic table’s three-dimensional schema zoomed in from a full view of the cluster to one of the Galaspar System. ‘Our strategy is direct. We shall drive across the system from the Mandeville point to Galaspar at full speed. We stop for nothing. Nothing. The enemy ships are powerful and numerous, but slow. They will not be able to match our speed.’

Rough images of the fortress monitors appeared. They were Galaspar’s massive guardians, ships that patrolled each of the planetary orbits in the system. They were lumbering beasts, each the size of a battle cruiser, built to overwhelm any threat to the empire through sheer power. They were

blocky, multilevel ziggurats with snub prows. Each of their levels was covered by huge turrets and torpedo banks, ensuring omnidirectional fire.

Mortarion paused, letting the captains get the measure of the vessels that would be the fleet's primary obstacle. Not one of them asked what would happen to a Death Guard ship that was crippled by enemy fire, as would surely happen to more than one. Mortarion had already given them their answer. *We stop for nothing*.

The table's view changed, so now only Galaspar itself was visible.

'The planetary defences are where the true obstacles begin. Beyond the orbital platforms there are ground-based cannons that are plentiful and massive. They are strong enough to repel and destroy ships attempting to close in for an orbital bombardment. But with our speed, and with the force of our advance, we will have the chance to *land* a ship. One. This one.'

The view changed again, rushing in to the surface of Galaspar and presenting the outline of a hive arcology.

'This is the primary hive of Galaspar,' Mortarion said. He regarded it as he would a condemned prisoner. 'Its name is Protarkos. The Order is centralised and hierarchical. Galaspar rules the empire, and Protarkos rules Galaspar. The information gathered by Imperial agents confirms this. More signals originate from Protarkos and travel to it than any other region on the planet. And the greatest number of those signals originate here.'

The top of the highest, most central tower began to pulse.

'It is a near certainty this location is the centre of control for Galaspar. This is our target. It must be taken, not destroyed, lest another node elsewhere take its place.' Another pulse appeared at the base of the hive. 'Heat readings suggest that the bulk of the hive's power is generated here. This is the secondary target, to be destroyed if possible, in order to accelerate the defeat of the enemy. The hive *must* be taken within a day and a night. After that, reinforcements from other hives will have had time to arrive. The situation is straightforward. Nothing short of orbital bombardment can overcome the scale of the army Galaspar can mobilise. But the fleet cannot approach unless the planetary defences are shut down. Therefore, the control centre of Protarkos must be taken. This ship, and the ten thousand legionaries it carries, will seize Protarkos in a day and a night.'

Mortarion finished and waited for questions. He had unveiled a plan that would bring a death to the Order that would be swift, brutal and all-

encompassing. There would be a cost to the Legion. That was as inevitable as death itself.

‘What is to prevent the Order from destroying their command centre before we can seize it?’ Tersus asked.

‘The Order is centralised, and its hierarchy is rigid in the extreme,’ said Mortarion. ‘The tyranny has its greatest power concentrated in the hands of the mightiest, who govern from the largest and most powerful hive. The leaders of the Order will not accept the risks attendant on decentralised control. Nothing must challenge the Order itself. That tenet is conveyed in its name. If this hive is the governing centre, then so it must remain. To destroy Protarkos would mean ceding control to a lesser hive and its leaders. The High Comptrollers will not even think of such a step, much less take it, except perhaps at the moment when no hope whatsoever remains to them. This is one circumstance where our limited time will be to our advantage. The comptrollers of Protarkos will believe that the reinforcements will reach them. It would be reasonable for them to think so. We will have to prove them wrong.’

Barrazin spoke up. He was studying the topography around the base of the hive. ‘Where can we land,’ he said, ‘to be able to take Protarkos so quickly?’

‘We will not land,’ said Mortarion. ‘The *Fourth Horseman* will strike Protarkos itself.’

The preparations took months. Mortarion chafed at the time, but he was also patient. He could see his goal coming step by step into view. When, at last, all was in readiness, and the journey to Galaspar was underway, he addressed the entire fleet from the bridge of the *Fourth Horseman*. The assault barque was the command ship for the attack, and it held a position near the tip of a wedge-shaped spear formation.

In the ship’s troop holds, eleven thousand of Mortarion’s elect waited to be unleashed on the Order.

Mortarion began his address when the fleet dropped out of the warp at the Mandeville point closest to Galaspar, and began its thrust, plasma drives running hard, into the system.

‘My Death Guard,’ he said, ‘when I first came to you, I called you my unbroken blades. I promised you that justice would come from your hands.

I vowed that doom would stalk a thousand worlds. On this day, doom comes to the first of them. Humanity suffers on Galaspar. The Order rules this empire, and the Order is as obscene as the subjugation of its people is complete. Justice demands annihilation. Banish all thoughts of mercy, because mercy is the plaything of the coward and the lie of the tyrant. Today, the blade descends on tyranny's neck. Nothing shall stay our hand. No enemy can stand before us. Death is the truth that awaits all. We march with Death. We are one with Death. Now, let doom and justice be one.'

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FIVE

Lord Comptroller Avald Stevang sat down to breakfast with Stuva Uvalliat, the High Comptroller of the Navy, and their two children, Wenn and Eeza. The pairing of the Lord Comptroller with one of the most powerful of the other High Comptrollers was a tradition of centuries-long standing in the Order, a way of reinforcing the peak of the pyramid. Wenn and Eeza were both adults now but had no official place in the structure of the Order, no rank they could call their own, no power to wield. What they had was power's expectation. The title of comptroller was hereditary by default, but subject to the stated will of the current holder of the title, and to the ratification of the Assembly of the High Comptrollers. As well, no family was allowed to have more members than it had inheritable titles. The Order held true to the stable self-perpetuation of itself. Should either offspring prove themselves unreliable in any way, they were subject to the same disposal as any other property of the comptrollers.

The breakfast hall, like all the other rooms of the quarters owned by Stevang and Uvalliat, was a vast decadence of space. The table and its four chairs were the only furniture on a floor thirty metres to a side. The conversation bounced off the walls and a ceiling so high it was almost lost

in the gloom above. Servants walked softly on padded soles. They brought the courses to the masters and withdrew in silence.

Stevang took a slice of bread, bit off a mouthful, chewed carefully, and frowned. He turned to Uvalliat and raised an eyebrow. ‘Have you had some bread yet?’ he asked.

‘I have. I was waiting to see if you noticed anything.’

‘It tastes different,’ said Stevang. ‘Not up to the standard of yesterday.’

‘I concur.’

Stevang pressed a button in a small recess of the table’s edge on his right. A moment later, House Comptroller Befessen arrived, walking as silently as the other servants. He stood at Stevang’s shoulder and bent down to hear the Lord Comptroller’s commands.

Stevang picked up a slice of bread, then let it drop onto the plate, as if it had offended him. ‘This is not acceptable,’ he said. ‘Get new bakers. Terminate the other labour units.’

‘At once, Lord Comptroller,’ Befessen said, and padded away to see that replacements were found, and the death sentence carried out.

‘You approve?’ Stevang asked Uvalliat.

‘I do.’

‘Fresh units make fresh bread,’ said Stevang, pleased with his formulation. The exercise in lethal discipline was also instruction for Wenn and Eeza.

Uvalliat made sure the lesson was learned.

‘Do you understand the necessity of the Lord Comptroller’s orders?’

‘Yes,’ said Eeza, and Wenn nodded.

‘Prove to me that you do.’ She pointed at Eeza. ‘Speak.’

‘Correction is weakness,’ said Eeza. ‘Once the labour unit has acquired the skills needed for the task, any decrease in quality means a loss of skill, rebellion, or both.’

Uvalliat raised her finger, silencing Eeza. She gave a curt nod, then pointed at Wenn. ‘Speak.’

‘If a labour unit is corrected, that gives it a chance to conceal its flaws and do more harm in the long run.’

‘Good,’ said Uvalliat. She went back to her breakfast. ‘Correction is weakness,’ she confirmed without looking up. ‘So, I never correct. Neither does the Lord Comptroller.’ Then she did look up, fixing her son and daughter with her remorseless stare. ‘It is therefore imperative that no one

act as if they need or expect correction.’

Neither sibling said anything. They did not have permission.

‘Do you understand?’ said Stevang.

‘We do,’ they answered in unison.

Good. It was wise to remind one’s heirs, from time to time, of the precariousness of their own survival. Doing so showed them how dangerous it would be to contemplate accelerating their ascension to power.

Alarms started screaming.

Wenn choked on his water. Uvalliat jumped up from her seat, knocking her cutlery to the floor. The knife and fork rattled against the stone, but the echo of the crash disappeared beneath the electronic wail of the alarms. Stevang was frozen for long seconds. His brain refused to process what he was hearing. He knew what kinds of emergency could trigger the alarms, but those circumstances had never arisen. The alarms had never sounded before.

This was a fundamental breach of routine. It was a shattering of order. The alarms meant the unimaginable.

‘A mistake…’ Uvalliat said.

That gave Stevang hope, and got him moving. He clutched at the promise of an error to be punished.

If there was no error, then he feared what he would learn.

But he had to know, and he had to fight the threat that challenged the Order.

He rose. He and Uvalliat ran from the breakfast hall, leaving their offspring behind them.

Many of the other High Comptrollers had already arrived at the master command centre when Stevang and Uvalliat reached it. They were not the last, though. They stopped running halfway down their private corridor to the chamber. They could not be seen to be rushing. That would signal weakness. It would also show disorder in their minds, and disorder could be contagious.

The thick steel door rose at their approach, then slammed down behind them. Stevang pushed away the thought that the heavy clang carried a timbre of finality. What he heard was security. The High Comptrollers must be protected, and they would be.

The chamber was a large one, befitting its status as the seat of power on Galaspar. The centre of the floor was sunken, with chairs for the High Comptrollers surrounding a hololithic table. On the levels surrounding the table were the rows of stations that controlled the defences of the empire.

Stevang took his seat, which gave permission to the others to do the same. There were still four seats empty.

‘Silence the alarms,’ Stevang said. A technician at one of the stations nearest him tapped her screen, and the ear-shredding wails wound down the octaves and quieted. Stevang looked up at the chronometer suspended from the ceiling. Two minutes had passed since the crisis had been declared. Some of the other High Comptrollers had further to go to reach the master command centre. ‘We will allow three more minutes,’ he said.

No one said anything. They sat still, watching the seconds count down. With one minute to go, two more of the High Comptrollers arrived. Those of Consumable Distribution and Chemical Regulation were still absent.

That was their failure.

‘Seal us in,’ said Stevang.

From below came a series of heavy booms. Scores of blast doors descended, cutting off all access to the master command centre. Stevang could not hear the bootsteps of massing soldiers, but he knew the mobilisation was underway. The chamber was being made impregnable, thanks to a strategy no one had really believed would ever be necessary.

‘Do we have communications established with the other hives?’ Stevang asked.

A technician stood up from his station. Hands at his side in rigid attention, he announced, ‘We do, Lord Comptroller. All lines are open. The High Comptrollers of every hive on Galaspar await your commands.’

‘Then we shall begin. Display the cause of the alarm.’

The hololithic table hummed. A map of the Galaspar System appeared. A brilliant line, pulsing with menace, appeared just past the orbit of the outermost planet.

‘An invading force,’ Uvalliat muttered.

The bright white line, a mar on the face of the empire, looked like a dagger aimed directly at Galaspar.

‘This has been confirmed?’ Stevang asked.

The technician who had spoken before leapt to attention once more. ‘It

has, Lord Comptroller.’ He sat back down and tapped at his screen. On the table, the dagger resolved itself into a rough schematic of the ships entering the system, and their approximate numbers. The unknown quantities were marked, and there were many of them. None of the Order’s vessels were in a position yet to provide more concrete information. There was no doubt this was an attack, though.

‘Communication from the invaders?’ said Stevang.

‘None, Lord Comptroller. They have not responded to our warnings.’

‘Are any other systems under attack?’

‘No, Lord Comptroller.’

Stevang took heart from that. If the enemy only had the strength to stage this one incursion, that was a sign of weakness. It also meant that the attention of the High Comptrollers would not be split between multiple fronts.

Stevang nodded to Uvalliat, giving her the signal to take over the strategy. This was her special responsibility. It was her doom if she failed.

‘Send in the fortress monitors,’ she said. She leant forward to tap at the table, bringing up the positions of the Order’s immense defence ships in the outer system. ‘These can be within intercept range in a few hours.’

‘They will be outnumbered,’ said Yava Tervian, High Comptroller of Morale.

‘Their purpose will be to slow the invaders,’ Uvalliat told her. ‘That will be enough for the rest of the fortresses to close with the foe and block the advance.’

‘How close might the enemy get before that happens?’ Tervian asked.

‘That cannot be predicted before we have a clearer sense of the invader’s strength.’

‘What about the gun platforms?’ Stevang asked. Rings of those defences spiralled around all the planets of the system.

Uvalliat hesitated. Stevang could see her weighing the risks. A hundred metres in diameter, minimally crewed and shielded, the gun platforms were not designed to be used in a fleet engagement. Their purpose was to protect a world with a wall of fire. If Uvalliat left any of the planets undefended, and the enemy chose to take advantage of that opening, the invaders might establish a stronghold inside the system from which to launch further attacks.

Uvalliat shook her head, as if rejecting that danger. ‘The platforms will be retasked,’ she said. ‘They will join the fortress monitors in the attack. The defensive priority must be Galaspar.’

Stevang said nothing, but he agreed. The other planets were irrelevant next to the home world of the Order. However imperfect they were for the mission they would be given, the platforms would add hundreds of guns to the battle.

Uvalliat dragged her finger across the surface of the table, drawing diagrams of the ship movements she wanted. ‘The invaders will not reach Galaspar,’ she said. ‘We will stop the ships in the outer system and embroil them in the fire of the gun platforms. While they are held, the rest of the monitors will arrive and obliterate them.’

‘Let it be done,’ said Stevang. ‘Let Order prevail.’

‘Let Order prevail,’ the other comptrollers repeated.

Uvalliat slapped her palm against the rim of the table, and her diagrams were transmitted to the stations in the hall, turning her strategy into commands, and the commands into reality. The orders had already been sent to the fortress monitors and the gun platforms before Stevang spoke again.

‘The Order will be victorious,’ he said. ‘Galaspar will also be ready. While our fleet attacks, prime the orbital and terrestrial defences.’

Screens descended from the ceiling to show his orders being carried out. Signals from the gun platforms confirmed their readiness, and that their guns were trained in the direction of an enemy that should never reach them. In the wastelands between the hives of Galaspar, immense domes folded back, and batteries of cannons rose from the ground, the barrels of the least of them a hundred metres long. Images succeeded one another, showing the progress of Galaspar’s armament. In less than an hour, the entire planet bristled with guns, thousands of lethal spines aiming their venom at the heavens. Nothing could approach Galaspar and live.

After that, all there was to do was wait and watch as the icons on the hololithic table vectored towards each other. Stevang found no fault in Uvalliat’s strategy, though he did not say so. If any aspect of it was found lacking, the failure would be hers alone. Even so, he watched with a mix of satisfaction and anticipation as the illuminated runes on the table converged. The greater number of the fortress monitors would not be part of

the initial encounter with the enemy. But the Galaspar System was well defended. The fortresses that were part of the first wave of the counter-attack and the gun platforms trailing in their wake looked like a swarm coming to devour the head of the advance.

The runes came within range of each other. The might of the Order opened fire. The centre of the table bloomed with light, incoming data from strikes and explosions coming in so fast, and overlapping so much, that it mimicked the flare of destruction in the void. Stevang blinked, momentarily dazzled. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘The lesson is taught anew.’

Satisfied murmurs went around the table. Then they stopped. A fortress monitor disappeared from the display on the table. Then another. The enemy’s advance had not slowed at all. Stevang stared at the estimated speed, and his mouth dried. He felt a dagger aimed at his throat.

‘What is happening?’ he whispered.

A platform extended from the strategium over the bridge, ending in a pulpit suspended almost halfway across. Standing in the pulpit, Mortarion had a commanding perspective of the bridge and the primary viewport. Screens to either side of the pulpit fed him constant updates of fleet positions and the status of engagements. Between what he saw and what he read, his perception moved with near omniscience across the void. Death flew through the Galaspar System. It spread its wings wide, and they were his wings. He witnessed what he had willed to happen, and all of its costs, and he was unmoved. Death could not recoil from itself.

The lumbering ziggurats of the fortress monitors, more than three kilometres long on each side, met the forward elements of the Death Guard fleet head-on. As soon as they had range, the fortresses fired, unleashing streams of torpedoes at the massive targets in the lead, just as Mortarion had intended.

‘They don’t know what they’re firing at,’ Barrazin commented. He and Tersus flanked Mortarion, one half-step behind. They were the two captains whose Great Companies, ten thousand strong, were in the troop holds of the *Fourth Horseman*. Mortarion had commanded that they stand with him on the bridge and see the battle in its entirety as well. ‘They don’t know they’re wasting their torpedoes on asteroids.’

Mortarion had created a shield of engine-harnessed planetoids to lead the

fleet's charge. Steered remotely by tech-adepts aboard the *Fourth Horseman*, they were barely manoeuvrable. They didn't have to be. Once the fleet began its run, on a course calculated before the Death Guard had even entered the warp, the trajectory of the asteroids was a straight line. Mortarion was stabbing at the heart of the system, and there would be no deviation.

'The masses have registered on the enemy augur systems,' said Mortarion. 'Perhaps the heat of the engines propelling the asteroids as well. And that has been enough for them to attack. They have not waited to learn more. They are being exactly as foolish as we foresaw.'

The torpedoes hit, and the asteroids kept moving at the same speed. The fortress monitors narrowed the distance between them, their crews apparently still convinced they were attacking vessels. Even with their engines at full thrust, the fortresses moved more slowly than the asteroids. They kept firing, shells and torpedoes hurtling at their targets without pause. The ordnance did not come in salvos. It came as a storm.

'They are being foolish through their excess of firepower,' said Mortarion. The explosions were a continuous, widespread eruption of fire and light. 'They are blinding their own sensors from telling them what they are shooting at.'

The torpedo strikes hit the relentless asteroids in steady, crust-shattering patterns. As the two fleets drew closer to one another, more and more of the gun platforms came within range, and their guns opened up. For the first encounter, neither the Death Guard nor the Order was in a position to flank the other.

Then one of the Order's fortresses, joining the battle as a rogue ship, out of formation with the others, came up beneath the plane of the Death Guard formation like a breaching leviathan. It rammed the light cruiser *Funereus* and broke its spine. The *Funereus*, less than half the size of the fortress, split in two, and its halves turned in a slow, lethal spin. Now in the centre of the formation, the Order's vessel launched torpedoes in all directions. Its commander had to know that it was doomed, and was determined to perish by disrupting the Death Guard advance.

'Maintain formation,' Mortarion ordered the fleet. 'All forward batteries on the intruder.'

The ships to the rear of the fortress ignored it. Most of them absorbed the

damage from the torpedoes with their shields. Another light cruiser, the *Maestus*, was hit multiple times. Its shields collapsed, and explosions ripped it apart.

Other vessels bore down on the fortress like the hand of fate. Their prows drove through the blasts of its munitions, and a hundred cannons opened fire at once. The fortress disintegrated as if it were nothing more than sand in the wind.

The asteroids began to crack under the sustained punishment. One, at the very forefront of the wedge, broke. When the damage became critical, and sensors built into the rock read that its structural integrity was about to collapse, huge mining charges spread across the rear-facing hemisphere triggered. The asteroid exploded, and the blast hurled a meteor storm at the Order's vessels. The debris slammed into the fortress monitors. Their shields were strong, their hulls so thick they were planetoids of metal, and they withstood the onslaught without major damage. Two were slowed almost to immobility. The gun platforms did not have the same kind of defences, and five of them disintegrated, their death cries lighting up the void, the blast waves rocking several of the other platforms.

Ships charged out from between the asteroids. The captains on the fortress monitors thought that here, at last, was the true enemy. Now they had to divide their fire between the planetoids and the rushing vessels. These ships were old, decommissioned destroyers, saved from the wrecking yards and modified for their final mission. Around a kilometre long, in their new form, they were clusters of guns mounted on hulls just strong enough to survive the power of the engines that propelled them. They came at the bigger ships as if they had a death wish.

They did. They were suicide ships, remotely steered, hardly more agile than the asteroids, but capable of intense sprints as they came within range of their targets. They unleashed their full complement of shells and torpedoes at the fortresses, weakening their prey ahead of their final approach.

The screen on Mortarion's right showed the vessel positions at the forward edge of the advance. Incoming data on rates of fire completed the picture for him. The commanders of two of the fortresses must not have realised the true nature of the threat until it was too late. They did not bring all their guns to bear on the fireships before the vessels were so close, they were

inside the arcs of most of the cannons. The fortresses tried to veer away. They moved like beasts in a mire, and had only begun their turns when the suicide ships rammed into their hulls. The fireships exploded, the charges within their own hulls many times more deadly than all their ordnance combined.

The fireballs were suns, clearly visible even from this distance through the viewport, and they engulfed the fortresses.

One of the Order's ships had pointed its nose above the ecliptic, trying to escape the fireships and rise above the escalating battle. Heat readings showed that the explosion had crippled it, ripping open its stern and much of the starboard side of the hull, destroying its steering and silencing its engines. Mortarion pictured it floating on, oxygen venting from a hundred breaches, interior lights going out one deck at a time as fires spread through its corridors.

The other fortress hit by a fireship kept going. Two more fortresses came up from behind to flank it and create a triangular formation of withering fire. The central ship burned. It had lost most of its port guns. Damage was spreading, secondary explosions shaking deeper and deeper within the hull. It could still fight, though. It could still bring the battle to the enemy.

'They aren't retreating,' said Tersus.

'Despite the damage,' Barrazin added.

The captains were, Mortarion noted, reading the details of the battle as fully as he was. 'This confirms our information on the nature of the Order,' he said. 'Retreat is impossible. It is not even conceivable.'

The three fortresses flew through the radiating debris of another asteroid. They ran into the gauntlet of more fireships. The flanking fortresses did not hesitate, and trained their guns on them, seeking to hold them back.

Mortarion pointed to the runes designating the fortresses. 'The crews on those ships are the first citizens of the Order to have sight of our fleet.' They would be seeing an implacable procession of capital ships and escort cruisers bearing down upon them. 'They see the coming of night for their empire.'

Dramatic spikes in the energy readings told the tale of the destruction that came next. Though the Order did not have warp travel technology, it did have plasma drives. The central monitor's drive was strained to the limit by the ship's need to reach and punish the invader. It was damaged beyond

repair, but because the engine still had power, no one even considered the option of trying to shut it down. And so, the inevitable happened. The plasma drive ruptured.

The massive release of uncontrolled energy blazed across the void, its silver-white light blinding any who saw it unshielded. All three fortress monitors were vaporised, consumed in an instant by the heat of a solar flare. The explosion shattered more asteroids, fireships vanished, and the XIV Legion's grand cruiser *Sepulchral* passed almost directly through the heart of the blast. It emerged a blackened ruin, its engines all but silent, moving on little more than inertia. On the port side, a huge gap in the hull revealed a cross-section of decks devoid of life. It left behind a comet's tail of debris and drifting bodies.

'Vox from Shipmaster Ravass of the *Sepulchral*,' the *Fourth Horseman*'s vox-officer reported.

'Open the channel,' said Mortarion.

Ravass' voice, laced with pain, came through a sea of static. *'We have little power left, my lord,'* he said. *'We can no longer keep pace with the fleet. Our duty now is clear.'*

'Bring death to many before the end, shipmaster,' Mortarion said.

'We shall, and they will learn to fear us before they perish.'

The *Sepulchral* left the formation. Isolated, it became an inviting target for the Order.

Mortarion caught Tersus' faint frown. 'Do not tell me that the Dusk Raiders were unfamiliar with sacrifice, captain,' he said. The *Sepulchral* had a crew of one hundred and fifteen thousand. They would all be dead soon, and so would the crews of still more ships before the *Fourth Horseman* reached its target. There was nothing to regret. This was the cost of the war. That was all.

'I do not question sacrifice,' said Tersus. 'May I ask if we can afford to lose the *Sepulchral*?'

'You may ask. The answer is that we can and must afford everything that brings us to victory.'

'The *Sepulchral* still has power. If we slow our advance, we can keep its strength as part of our formation.'

'What advantage would that give us?' Mortarion asked.

'We are getting the measure of the enemy, and it is definite that their ships

are no match for ours. Might we be more methodical in our advance? Instead of trying to race through the Order's ships, we could destroy them all, one step at a time.'

'Their numbers are too great,' Mortarion said. 'That is the Order's primary threat. Numbers. If we slow down, we will give the enemy the chance to bring all its strength to bear. That would justify the caution of those who would blockade Galaspar and forget about it until it suits the convenience of the Great Crusade. We have not come to lay a siege. We have come to stab a tyranny in its heart. The *Sepulchral* is still part of this war. It will do its part for the advance. We go on at full speed.'

Ravass was true to his word. Long after the last vox transmission, the readings marching across the platform screens told Mortarion that the *Sepulchral* did not die easily.

And the fleet plunged deeper into the Galaspar System, heedless of the gathering power that sought to block it.

In the master command centre on Galaspar, the High Comptrollers stared at the hololithic table. The data flowing over it told a narrative that defied their understanding of the universe. Already the enemy fleet had passed the outermost of the system's planets. Around the room, the technicians summarised the reports coming in from the Order's ships. It was a constant chatter, a monotone of mounting doom.

'Gun platforms now flanking the enemy. Trying to draw fire.'

'The enemy is only firing forward.'

'More enemy losses confirmed.'

'No reduction in fleet speed or alteration of direction.'

Stevang shared a stricken look with Uvalliat.

'They don't care about their losses,' Stevang said, the full realisation of what that meant for the Order – for him – spreading like a sickness in his gut. He knew that the Order was a cold and ruthless regime, uncaring of the crews that had lost their lives in the past hours. But this enemy was much, much colder.

The blazing dagger of the fleet came inexorably on, and Stevang was now sure it came straight for him.

The Death Guard drove through the Order's initial counter-attack. It was

clear that the enemy had not expected anything like this. *They have not been challenged before,* Mortarion thought. *Or if they have been, they were not truly threatened.* The Galaspar Cluster had been isolated for millennia. There would have been no menace to the empire from outsiders of any kind. It showed. The enemy ships were slow at first in adapting to the situation. They wasted their fire on the asteroids for longer than he could have hoped. As the fleet went deeper into the system, though, the Order finally changed tactics. More and more of the fortress monitors joined the battle. They held back, then closed in together. There were enough ships now that they attempted to flank the Death Guard at the same time as attacking from the front in order to blunt the Legion's forward momentum.

There was so much cannon and torpedo fire, it was as if the fleet were driving through the heart of a star.

'Ignore flanking attacks,' Mortarion commanded. 'Minimal return fire. Let all our force be aimed forwards, at clearing the path.'

The fortresses attacking the front disappeared. The hell of fire unleashed by the Death Guard dwarfed in power all of the Order's assault. The fleet continued at full speed. It left the slower ships of the Order behind. And more of its own.

Mortarion noted each loss. They were all acceptable. They were all necessary. The *Fourth Horseman* was the key ship. It was at the forefront and centre of the wedge. Though the fortress monitors and the gun platforms peeled off the edges of Death Guard formation, they did nothing to halt its lightning charge. They could not reach the centre.

As the fleet drew closer to Galaspar, the attacks by the Order became stronger and more desperate. They reached further into the formation. Through the viewport, Mortarion saw the fortresses mass against the cruiser *Melancholia*. Torpedoes punched through its hull and detonated its munitions. The blast threw it off course and it slammed into the battleship *Inevitable Call*. They locked prows, then veered together to starboard, endangering more vessels.

'If they don't stop…' said Barrazin. He left the danger unspoken. The fleet's formation was tight, and the turning radius of the capital ships was wide. There was no chance of evasive manoeuvre if a catastrophe developed.

'They will turn,' said Mortarion. The crews of those ships would find a

way. *They must.* They knew what was at stake. They would sacrifice everything to preserve the forward momentum of the fleet.

The *Inevitable Call* managed to turn against the pressure of the *Melancholia*. It drove the two ships even more into each other. They were a massive ruin. Their course changed just enough for them to collide with one of the asteroids. In their last moments, the two ships fired everything they had to port. The barrage and the cataclysm that came when they hit the asteroid took out several of the Order's fortresses.

'Captain Tersus,' Mortarion said, 'I know you are conscious of what we are losing in this advance. Are you just as conscious of what we are gaining?'

'I am, my lord.'

'We have sliced through the Order's defences,' said Barrazin.

'The outer ones,' said Tersus.

Mortarion said nothing. He stared forward, bracing for the attacks from the orbital platforms and the planetary guns. The drive through the system had been a mere prologue. If he had misjudged the *Fourth Horseman* or the capabilities of the Order, he would lose everything.

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SIX

Stevang couldn’t sit any longer. Through his rising panic and anger, he knew he should be staying put, being the immoveable centre of authority while everyone else showed their weakness. That was what he should be doing. He was the highest point of order, and he was giving in to a dangerous weakness in failing to be still.

He didn’t care. Nor did any of the other High Comptrollers. The events closing in on Galaspar were too terrible to leave room for political calculation.

Stevang paced around and around the hololithic table of the control chamber. He looked up at the technicians’ levels, gazes jumping from one screen to another as he passed, as if somehow he would learn more of what was happening and know it sooner, and then take action faster. The other High Comptrollers milled around, as helpless as he was, and shuffled to get out of his way when he stormed past them. The technicians called out the changes, their voices a redundant choir, and the runes on the hololithic table moved closer and closer to Galaspar.

‘The fortress monitors are falling behind,’ said Uvalliat, her voice trembling. ‘They can’t keep up with the enemy.’

‘Then Galaspar itself will stop these ships. We have the defences.’ He rounded on the nearest technician. ‘Fire the guns.’ The ground-based defences were under his direct jurisdiction. ‘Take down that fleet before it enters orbit. Fire! Fire now!’

‘Lord Comptroller,’ the technician protested. ‘We don’t have targeting on the ships yet. The asteroids at the forefront are blocking us.’

‘Then destroy them!’

‘If we wait longer, we’ll have trajectories that can flank them,’ said Uvalliat.

‘And how close will they be then? That will be too late. We have the munitions.’ He stabbed a finger at the first technician in his line of sight. ‘Are the asteroids in range?’ he demanded, whether that operator knew or not.

‘Momentarily, Lord Comptroller,’ said a technician to Stevang’s left.

‘Then destroy them!’ Stevang shouted. ‘Fire the guns! That is my command!’

‘Opening fire,’ the technician said.

Stevang paused in his pacing. He gathered his breath. He had given his order, and it was leading to action. That made it easier to think. And the guns of Galaspar would stop the enemy fleet. It didn’t matter what kind of ships were coming. They could not withstand the bombardment of thousands upon thousands of orbital and terrestrial cannons.

‘Open the dome,’ Stevang said. It was time to witness the might of the Order.

The ceiling of the master command centre rumbled back, revealing a dome of reinforced armaglass. With a heavy mechanical grind, the centre of the floor now rose until it was above the rows of stations, and the High Comptrollers were within the dome, the landscape surrounding the primary hive visible to them.

Though the tower was the tallest spire of the hive, it was also the most thoroughly defended, its strongest redoubt. It emerged from the very heart of the hive, effectively surrounded by walls many kilometres wide. Despite its height, it gave the impression of being not much more than a squat protrusion, so massive was the ferrocrete keep that it surmounted.

The opening of the dome calmed some of the restlessness of the other High Comptrollers. It was a rare event for any citizen of Galaspar to look

outside, unless they were forced to *go* outside. From this vantage point, not very far below the perpetual cloud cover, they could see scores of kilometres in every direction. Hills of waste stretched out in concentric rings around the hive. Near the horizon, the distant silhouettes of other hives jutted up sharply. And in lines that ran all the way from one hive to the other, were the guns.

The dome had barely opened when the planet erupted. The thunder of the artillery vibrated the walls and the floor of the master command centre. The entire hive thrummed with the beat of the volleys. Flames belched from the mouths of the cannons, and shells thirty metres long launched in a swarm up to the obscured heavens. The cannons recoiled in their frames, immense pistons slamming back before the auto-loader machinery prepared them to fire again.

The shells streaked upward through the clouds. The grey-brown sky glowed a ferocious red with the reflected light of thousands of contrails.

It seemed to Stevang that the light had barely dimmed when the technicians called out the reports of explosions. The hololithic table bloomed once more, the marks of the impacts overlapping so much that they became a uniform glow, mimicking the power of the blasts in the void.

Stevang pictured the hammering of the shells against the asteroids. ‘Here is the enemy’s welcome to Galaspar,’ he said. ‘Here is how the invader dies.’ First the asteroids, then the fleet. The guns would not stop until there was nothing left.

‘They have guns too,’ Uvalliat said quietly.

‘We have more.’

The conduct of the war had slipped from Uvalliat’s hands. The fortress monitors had failed, and that meant she had too. He would have to distance her from his household once the crisis was over.

‘Shouldn’t we…?’ Uvalliat began.

Cataclysmic explosions drowned her out. They built upon each other, a mounting roar of annihilation. The dome was soundproofed, yet the thunder was so huge that Stevang cried out and covered his ears.

The earlier glow in the sky was as nothing. Now the sky truly burned. The clouds roiled with white heat flashes and horizon-
to-horizon firestorms. Stevang turned away from the flashes, dazzled.

‘Targeting disabled!’ a technician shouted.

‘What is happening?’ Stevang demanded.

‘The asteroids have exploded.’

‘We broke them apart?’

‘No, Lord Comptroller. They’ve exploded. We can’t see through the debris.’

‘Impacts imminent,’ another operator warned.

‘Keep firing,’ Stevang ordered.

‘The guns won’t have targets.’

‘Keep firing, I said!’

The guns roared, and then their terrible voices became whispers before the fury that descended. The fire came for the land. Meteors and the wreckage of fireships streaked downward. A rain of metal and burning stone battered the landscape. The hive shook again, and then again, at each impact. Dust clouds rose from each new crater, and the land outside the dome disappeared, swallowed by a limbo shot through with flame. Stevang held his breath, waiting for the meteor that would strike the tower. He tried to give the order to retract the dome, but the thought of waiting in darkness, unable to see even the dust and fire, was even more terrifying.

And then there were new streaks of flame and new explosions, and the hololithic table showed what they were before the technician announced, ‘The fleet is bombarding us.’

Stevang could see nothing of the landscape now. Dust and smoke and fire consumed the world utterly. The world was gone. The world was ending. The roar of the explosions was continuous, yet within the unbroken booming, Stevang could still feel the hammering of separate beats. Gasping, eyes wide, he reeled back against the table. The other High Comptrollers were shouting, but he could hear nothing except the all-consuming roar. He was shouting too, though no one could hear, shouting his last order over and over because it was the only thing left as the world burned and the hive shook.

‘Keep firing! Keep firing! Keep firing!’

He was screaming the words now, and he had to keep on, because if he stopped shaping words then his scream would lose all form and become a mindless howl of terror and anger. The targeting was down. The guns were firing blind. But he had to believe there were enough guns still operational, and that even the undirected fire would be so ferocious in its volleys that it

would hit something. He would not believe that Galaspar was helpless, even as it was too easy to believe that Galaspar was ending.

And then, in the chaos and fire, there was a shape, too huge to be concealed. It descended from the burning heavens. It was a ship, several kilometres long, a mountain of war coming right for the hive.

Above the bridge of the *Fourth Horseman*, Mortarion and his captains watched the last of the fleet's defences vanish under the sustained fire of Galaspar's guns. From his position at the strategium pulpit, Mortarion felt the war take the shape he had foreseen. The blade of the scythe was about to strike the heart of the Order.

As the asteroids broke down, the charges planted on them triggered. The meteor swarms fell on the planet, and so did the last of the fireships, racing to an explosive death on the surface.

The fleet's shield was gone, but it had served its purpose. It had brought the Death Guard to near orbit. Now it struck a first blow to open the way for the *Fourth Horseman*, a blow followed moments later by a massive volley from the fleet.

'Galaspar truly is well defended,' said Barrazin.

The orbiting gun platforms were pounding the fleet, and the terrestrial guns were sending up a volley without end. With the asteroids gone, the fleet was vulnerable. The view through the primary oculus was riven by the streaks of shells.

Galaspar will not be protected for long. 'The defences are what we expected,' said Mortarion. 'Therefore, they are not enough. Our way is about to open.'

As he spoke, the fire from the planetary guns stuttered. The intensity of the volleys diminished. The shells that came from the surface lacked the concentration of fire that had demolished the asteroids.

'They cannot see us,' Mortarion said. 'Take us in.'

'Engines full,' said Shipmaster Ralla Evernus. The *Fourth Horseman* surged ahead, arrowing down to the burning cauldron of Galaspar's atmosphere.

'Vox to fleet,' Mortarion said.

'Fleet channels open,' the vox-officer responded, and a bronze vox-unit rose from the pulpit on a mechadendrite, its grille flared like a serpent's

hood.

‘All ships,’ Mortarion said. ‘Begin your withdrawal.’ Barrazin was not wrong. The combined blow of the meteors and the bombardment had blunted Galaspar’s defences, but only for a brief time. The enemy guns would find their targets again soon enough. No ship could withstand that kind of fire for long. ‘Get out of the range of the planet’s guns,’ he continued. ‘The enemy vessels will be catching up soon. Finish them, and await my signal to return.’ Unless the guns were disabled, his capital ships could not approach. If they could not approach, there would be no victory.

I will silence them.

The *Fourth Horseman* descended through the clouds, shrouded by flame. *I am here, Galaspar. The blade of the scythe is swinging for your heart.* The storms of fire buffeted the ship, but its course was unerring, and predetermined. The assault barque’s target was invisible, concealed by the layers of burning, poisonous, filthy air. Though it was hidden, it was still doomed. Mortarion had studied the infiltration reports on the planet carefully. Enough of Galaspar’s geography was known for him to pinpoint the largest of the hives. The long-range augur array of the *Fourth Horseman* had identified its location almost as soon as the fleet had entered the system, zeroing in on the biggest concentration of radiated heat.

The speed of the fleet’s advance had been high. It had also been calculated relative to Galaspar’s rotation so that the *Fourth Horseman* would start its descent with the hive on the near face of the planet. The invasion was a sweep of the scythe, but it was also a hurled spear, and it was about to strike home.

The *Fourth Horseman* burst out of the clouds, and into the maelstrom of dust. Visible just barely through the vortex of greyish white was the silhouette of the hive, bulky and already so very close. The *Fourth Horseman* closed in on the upper portion of the hive. The moment of collision rushed forward. Time became precious, became rare. Even so, Mortarion waited until the last moment before he said, ‘Reverse thrust and brace for impact.’

The arrest-thrusters roared to life, the flames of their exhaust so powerful that their heat seared the walls of the hive ahead of the ship, the assault barque slowed by a firestorm. The jolt of the arrest-thrusters would have broken other ships in half. The change in gravitational vector was almost

lethal in itself to the mortal crew, and those who were too slow to obey Mortarion's command flew against bulkheads, shattering their spines. On the bridge, Barrazin and Tersus stood fast, holding to the railing surrounding the strategium with one hand. Mortarion, unsupported, stood still as death.

Turrets on the ramparts of the hive opened fire. It was a pathetic show of defiance. It meant nothing to the *Fourth Horseman*.

Slowing, but still so fast, so terrible, the ship rushed at the tower. Mortarion watched the walls fill the expanse of the viewport.

The blow that had been launched from the edge of the system struck home. The *Fourth Horseman* slammed into the side of the hive.

Now came darkness. Now came fire.

The enemy ship hit less than a quarter of the way down from the peak. The outer walls were several kilometres away from the centre, but the master control tower swayed. The movement threw Stevang off his feet. He crashed into the hololithic table, fell, and slid across it. Technicians tumbled from their seats. High Comptrollers pitched over chairs and off the platform to the stations below. The dome cracked.

Lying on his back on the table, looking up at the billowing smoke and fire, deafened by a crash so huge it must have been Galaspar itself howling in agony, Stevang waited for the fall and the end.

The tower swayed again, though not as violently, and he managed to sit up. Looking down through the lower portion of the dome, at the misty, half-concealed shapes of the hive, he saw everything shaking, and not all the towers of Protarkos withstood the tremor. Some sheared away from the mass of the hive, suddenly delicate in their vulnerable lines, and disintegrated as they tumbled down into the darkness of the dust clouds. Some toppled in sections, seeming to fold in on themselves, their peaks suddenly pointing downward, and then they too were gone. Power flickered on and off inside the master command centre, and where the hive split open, huge arcs of electricity flared into the gloom and then vanished.

The power went off and stayed off for several minutes. Stevang waited in the darkness, not moving. There was nothing to be done. Then the lights came back, and the tower had stopped shaking.

He lurched off the table and was able to be the first of the comptrollers to

be standing again. Below him, the technicians were at their stations again, and looking up, waiting for someone to give a command, any command.

‘Send the call to all hives,’ Stevang said. ‘We are invaded. The enemy is here. All forces in the hive, converge on the invaders and destroy them. To all hives, by order of the Lord Comptroller, total mobilisation.’

Just one ship. That is just one ship. It was hard to remember that. The vessel was so huge. *It doesn’t matter how big its troop holds are. We outnumber the invaders thousands and more to one.*

He was still in command. He was still in control.

Fires raged where the *Fourth Horseman* had hit. Entire levels had collapsed. The hive was no longer recognisable. There were no halls, no corridors, no manufactoria. There was only ruin, a tangle of torn metal frameworks and jagged mounds of rockcrete.

The dead lay in the tens of thousands, and those were the corpses that had not been vaporised by the heat and force of the collision. Bodies were draped over stone and crushed beneath it. The uncomprehending cries of the wounded rose as the thunder of the crash and the secondary cracks of the slumping hive gradually faded.

The disruption was total. The labour units walked aimlessly over the rubble, stunned, suddenly without purpose. They had no instructions, and there were no overseers to whip them and point them where to go.

Terror cut through the fog of the numbing drugs. For some of the wretched, there was an awakening of a kind.

None of the labour units had true names. What they had were numerical designations. But where there was consciousness, there was identity, and identity craved a name.

In her moments of clarity, the woman thought of herself as Digger. She was Digger because when she wasn’t working in the waste recycling manufactorum, she would dig through the heaps of refuse. They consisted of the material that was completely rejected, and that moved sluggishly out of the manufactorum’s ejecta tubes. She dug to find what extra bits of nourishment might be in the filth, those little greasy chunks of fat too small for the machines to process, those bits of slime and muck that might go into the mouth and be choked down.

She was not digging now. Now, she was frightened. She was also full of

wonder. She crouched behind a chunk of rockcrete with Scrape. He was another unit from her cohort. They looked at each other, their eyes huge and white in faces caked with grime.

‘What do we do?’ Scrape asked. He looked unsure whether he had permission even to draw breath. No one was forcing them to do anything, and everyone around them was dead. There was no one to help.

Digger peered over their shelter. She looked across the huge cave that had opened up inside the hive, to the leviathan that had smashed into Protarkos. It was as if a hammer had been taken to the world.

‘I want to see closer,’ she said. To the novelty of wonder was added another new experience – curiosity. The ship was the new centre of reality. It called to her.

It called to Scrape too. He nodded, and the two of them moved out from behind their chunk of rubble. They scrambled over the ruins and the dead. They circled around new shafts many levels deep, where fire roared as from a volcano. The cave floor was a crushed mass of walls and ceilings. They moved where there had never been space before, and the prow of the ship grew more and more gargantuan in their sight.

‘How can this be?’ said Scrape. He sounded as terrified and excited as Digger felt. ‘How did the Order permit this?’

‘It didn’t,’ said Digger. She giggled at the unthinkable heresy she had just uttered. ‘It didn’t,’ she said again, just to hear herself say those words.

They were a few hundred metres from the end of the ship’s prow, and another hundred beneath it. Heat radiated from the hull, baking the muck on Digger’s flesh. She looked up at the monster, unable to understand what it was, or what it meant, except that it changed everything, because it was an impossible thing that had happened.

Scrape froze and clutched her arm.

‘What?’ She tried to pull away, to get nearer still to the monster.

‘Listen!’ Scrape hissed.

She heard the thundering of bootsteps now. The familiarity of the sound chilled her blood. Excitement drained away. The power of the Order was approaching. She could already feel the stranglehold wrapping itself around her again. She fought to breathe. And the marching boots grew louder and louder. They were coming from everywhere, echoing out of the ragged openings around the cave.

There was a hollow a few metres away, by a gap in the rubble. She rushed over to it and curled up inside, Scrape a bare moment behind her. They made themselves as small as possible. There was no time to flee the cavern, and Digger had no sense of where she might run to. The only spaces she had known in this region of the hive were gone.

She and Scrape shivered and waited. The sound of marching grew, and then the soldiers arrived. They entered the cavern in a flood, in wave after wave of fanatical officers leading slave soldiers drugged into a state of fearless yet obedient aggression.

Scrape began to whine in fear. Digger trembled so hard she could barely breathe. This was the Order in the most frightening form that they knew. They had seen the punishment the soldiers dealt to those who in any way fell short of what the comptrollers demanded. They had never seen troops in such numbers. Their blocky armour painted red and blue, the symmetrical colours of the Order, they stormed into the cave in never-ending thousands, columns of ants rushing to destroy the intruder in their nest.

For a few minutes, in the disorder of the new cavern, where all that was known was destroyed, a dream had stirred in Digger. When the soldiers came, the dream evaporated. The reality she had always known returned. The impossibility would be destroyed, and the tyranny of order restored.

In the base of the prow, huge doors gaped wide, a monster opening its maw to devour. A ramp descended. Digger heard other bootsteps, heavier ones, marching with an ominous precision beyond the drugged stomping of the soldiers.

From the dark depths of the ship came phalanxes of giants clad in armour of dead grey. Digger’s jaw dropped; she forgot to breathe, and she forgot to be afraid of the soldiers of the Order. These beings belonged to another state of existence entirely. They were too perfect in the relentless march towards their foe, too terrifying in their inhuman helms. At their head was the greatest and most terrifying giant of them all. He towered over all the others. He wore a hood instead of a helm, and though a breather concealed the lower part of his face, all Digger had to see were his eyes to know that Death had taken physical form before her.

Scrape whined in terror of the apparition.

Surrounding Death was a group of warriors not as tall as he was, but more forbidding and ominous than the others of their kind. Their movements

were inexorable, their silence a weapon in itself. They were the hands of Death, Digger thought. The extensions of his will.

Thousands of the giants marched out of the ship. They formed a wedge that drove into the massed horde of the Order. The soldiers of Galaspar surrounded the invaders, and had come to destroy them, but as the attack began, they seemed only to be offering themselves up for slaughter. The leader of the giants carried a massive scythe, and his warriors bore weapons that were made in its image, and only slightly smaller. Digger gasped and cowered down when the scythes struck. Bodies exploded with such force that a rain of misted blood filled the cavern. Scrape whimpered, rubbing at the sudden coat of gore on his skin. Digger felt it trickle down behind her ears, and she stared, unable to move, as the scythes swept back and forth, back and forth, and hundreds of soldiers of the Order vanished with every heartbeat, taken by the crimson reaping. The terrible lord of the giants strode forward without pausing, just killing, and troops fell on all sides of him.

The lines of the warriors now leaving the ship carried guns, and they opened fire. The hammering rattle of the shells seemed an echo of the thunder that had heralded the giants' arrival. The Order's troops fired back, but the report of their rifles was pitiful by comparison, an infant's squall of helplessness.

Digger stared, and the impossible happened again and again. Her heart beat with fear, but also with excitement once more. The Order attacked in waves, and the giants demolished each wave as if it had no more substance than smoke. Digger's teeth chattered with the rhythm of the guns. She trembled in the ecstasy of awe.

These were more than giants. Gods had arrived, bringing the end of all things.

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SEVEN

The soldiers of the Order came at the Death Guard in another wave. Their eyes were dull, but their mouths foamed with anger. They fired stubbers and lasrifles. Their weapons had no more effect against the ceramite of the legionaries than they had with any of the other waves. Volleys of bolter fire erupted from the entire length of the eleven-thousand-strong column, and another wave went down. The rubble of the cavern floor was disappearing under the carpet of the dead. The Death Guard had almost reached the far end, where the warren of corridors led to the heart of the hive.

'These are not soldiers,' Barrazin voxed to Mortarion and Tersus. *'They are automatons of flesh.'*

Mortarion gave *Silence* a quick jerk, shaking off the excess blood and bits of viscera from the scythe. He glanced back. Barrazin and Tersus were each commanding a third of the legionaries, and their portions of the column were splitting off in preparation for the greater dispersement soon to come.

'I don't think the officers who command them have ever fought a real enemy,' said Tersus. *'That doesn't mean they won't adapt.'*

He valued Barrazin's skill and mercilessness, and the fact that he, above all other Terran officers, seemed to understand what Mortarion sought to

make of the Death Guard. Tersus was more beholden to the Legion's past, but he commanded well, and inspired the loyalty of all his men. He was also quick-thinking, and that was a quality Mortarion wanted in the fight for Protarkos.

So far, though, the Order had made use of only one strategy, and that was to try to overwhelm through numbers alone.

'Are they hoping to smother us in corpses?' Barrazin asked. *'Otherwise, this is just a waste of our time and their flesh. They pose no challenge.'*

'They do,' said Mortarion without a break in the lethal back-and-forth slashes of *Silence*. The terror he created cut through the drug-induced haze of the enemy soldiers closest to him, and they broke and tried to run before they died. 'Remember, the challenge they present is precisely in the loss of time,' Mortarion continued. 'We must not give the Order the chance to bring its full might to bear on its home ground.' He marched faster.

One step behind and to his sides, his Deathshroud escorts in their Cataphractii Terminator armour advanced with metronomic paces and impassive, terrible silence. Their power scythes turned the pitiable armour of the Order troopers into shreds. The blades exploded torsos, sending human shrapnel flying. The front of the new wave of the enemy collapsed. Screaming, experiencing fear for the first time in their lives, the soldiers trampled each other in their attempt to flee.

The Deathshroud let none survive.

Over the corpses of the dead, still more soldiers came, desperate in their charge and already frightened. Mortarion pulled the *Lantern* from its holster. He fired quickly, the drum magazine feeding the blaster's energy shots. It was as if he'd unleashed an artillery barrage into the front ranks.

'The planet's guns are already firing again, holding our fleet at bay,' he said. 'Our day and a night to take Protarkos have begun. When that period has passed, the millions will be upon us.'

From the moment the last of the Death Guard legionaries had marched off the ramp from the *Fourth Horseman*, the battle had lasted only minutes. Already, tens of thousands of the enemy lay dead in the cavern created by the assault barque. *A good start, but only a start.* There was a pause as Mortarion's formation reached the far end of the cavern, where there was a honeycomb of openings of corridors leading deeper into the hive. The attacks from the Order had ceased for the moment. The enemy was inside

those halls, making ready. There would be less space now. The struggle would become harder. And the sheer scale of the hive's maze would work to the defenders' advantage. It was time for the Legion to spread out.

'Go,' Mortarion voxed to the eleven thousand. 'Let none live who take arms against you.'

The Death Guard moved into the halls, the formations dividing more and more at each juncture. Soon, most of the legionaries were operating in squads, compact units of slaughter that cauterised the hive as they advanced, leaving only corpses behind, and always moving up and to the centre, always making for the heart of the Order's control.

Shortly after Tersus had started down the corridors, vox-speakers began to blare. *'Kill the invaders,'* a voice exhorted. *'All of Galaspar must fight. Kill the invaders. All of Galaspar must fight.'* The command repeated over and over, interrupted only by a klaxon that shrieked between every two iterations of the words.

The Order was demanding total mobilisation.

Its subjects obeyed.

Tersus turned around a sharp corner of the corridor, and the hall opened into a space hundreds of metres wide before the doors of a gigantic manufactorum. To the left and right were scores of levels of open-faced dormitories. Ladders dropped from the cramped sleeping quarters down to the main floor level. At the far end of the open area, steps thirty metres across led up to the entrance of the manufactorum, which gaped like a gigantic maw.

Thousands of soldiers filled the immense hall. Mixed in with them were even more civilians. They clutched makeshift weapons, mere clubs and tools. They frothed at the mouth, their eyes wide and crazed with chems.

'Citizens of Galaspar, we are your liberators.' Tersus used his helm's vox-casters to broadcast his voice over the blare of the Order's endlessly looping command and the gathering roar of the mob. 'You have nothing to fear from us. We come only for your masters.'

The civilians didn't listen. Maddened by chems, driven by enforcers, they raced forward with the soldiers. A wave of feral humanity crashed into the squad. There was no discipline to the attackers. They fired and clawed in equal measure, shrieking lunacy.

Tersus and his brothers stood firm against the wave. They grounded themselves and leant forward, using strength and mass against bodies. In a wedge formation, they forced their way into the space. The legionaries on the flank blasted the attackers with flamers. They moved the streams of ignited promethium back and forth, creating a wall of fire. Screaming torches that had been humans ran back, spreading death. The wave faltered, and the burn gave Tersus and the others enough space to bring their bolters to bear. They swept the barrels to and fro in a synchronised attack, the lethal precision of the shells reaping a rain of blood, and a storm of sundered flesh.

‘They must be increasing the war-chems,’ said Legionary Garro as the squad killed hundreds of soldiers and civilians in the space of a few breaths. ‘These are too addled to be afraid.’

‘Too addled to fight properly as well,’ said Tersus. ‘Even the soldiers.’ They fought like animals.

As the squad moved deeper into the hall, more and more civilians came down from above, driven out by whip-wielding enforcers. The sea of attacking humanity was inexhaustible. Tersus issued the warning again. Either the people didn’t hear him, or they couldn’t listen. They were lost in the haze of violent chemical madness. They couldn’t understand that they had a choice.

Tersus pitied them, but the attackers were the enemy, no matter who they were or their reason, if any, for fighting. The futility of their assault changed nothing. They took up arms against the Death Guard, and so they died.

‘This defies reason,’ said Garro, sounding dismayed. His armour was coated in gore.

‘It is chems, desperation and conditioning. It will stop when the Order is no more.’

The squad spread out more widely. Nothing the forces of the Order used could pierce the legionaries’ armour, but the sea of struggling bodies was an obstacle, and all obstacles to the swift and total capture of Protarkos were doomed. Mortarion’s commands were clear. All resistance was to be destroyed.

A man came at Tersus with a wrench. Tersus shot him. There was a fraction of a second of shocked pain on the man’s face before his torso

exploded. Fragments of bone ripped out the throat and eyes of the woman next to him.

The squad advanced slowly, the current of bodies never letting up. The legionaries reached the steps of the manufactorum, and its maw vomited out thousands more workers. They hurled themselves at the Death Guard with cries of mindless despair. Tersus felt sorrow, both for the waste and for the workers' plight. This was what the Order did to its citizens. This, he kept reminding himself, was what Mortarion had come to end. *The end will be worth this massacre. It has to be.*

Tersus put aside the pity. It would not end the war or break the Order. He did what was necessary, and fired his bolter again, killing five with a single volley.

Blood ran in streams along the floor. The squad climbed the steps, wading into the new onslaught, and turned the streams into a cataract. The people and soldiers came at them from all sides, and died on all sides. The legionaries left a swath of ruined bodies behind them. The air was moist with blood. The footing for the mortals was treacherous, slippery with organs and sharp with bones.

The interior of the manufactorum was a great open area, containing two huge spherical gas reservoirs. Workers clambered off the scaffolding surrounding them, their movements jerky and frantic like panicked rodents as they hurried to join in the attack.

Tersus pointed at the reservoirs. 'Rupture those,' he ordered. He and Garro opened fire at the same time, aiming above the crowd. Mass-reactive shells punched through the metal skin of the spheres. Their explosions triggered the greater one.

The reservoirs vanished in a dragon's breath of fire. The Death Guard held fast, withstanding the shock wave and the inferno like rocks in a gale. A storm of flame as high as the hall blasted across the manufactorum, out into the space beyond, and washed up the walls of the open dormitories. The dragon roared on and on, shattering all before it. The entire hall slumped. The dormitories collapsed, crushing the people still inside. Thousands of tonnes of rockcrete plummeted into the hall. The manufactorum's ceiling split and rained down chunks of rubble. Fissures split its walls, and they leant towards each other, but did not collapse.

The roar ended in an aftermath of smoke and dust and silence. Tersus

looked back through the now skewed entrance of the manufactorum. The hall beyond was a heap of rubble. Nothing was left of the frenzied army that had been attacking the squad. Outside the manufactorum there was no sign of the pulverised bodies. They lay beneath the wreckage. Inside, the smell of burned flesh filled the air. Thousands of blackened corpses lay in contorted angles.

The voice of the Order was mute.

The squad started forward again. Limbs crunched beneath Tersus' boots, brittle as twigs. Ash floated around him. It gathered on his pauldrons.

Past the craters where the reservoirs had been were smaller, sealed doorways. Tersus chose the central one. A melta bomb took out the blast door, and the squad passed through, entering a region of narrower halls and closed dormitories. As if the destruction of the great hall had taken place on another world, the vox-cast of the Order continued here.

More soldiers charged down the hall, and they died quickly. Tersus shot the last of them, and then stopped by a large door. He slid it aside, and was greeted by screams and begging. He stood in the entrance of another dormitory, this one a single hall. Before him were hundreds of civilians, packed tightly together. They trembled as he entered, and many fell to their knees, filthy hands outstretched, begging for mercy they had never received in their lives.

'Kill the invaders,' the vox-speakers in the chamber screamed.

'You have nothing to fear from us,' Tersus vox-cast.

'All of Galaspar must fight.'

The people looked back and forth at Tersus and at the box from which came the voice of their masters. They wavered between two fears of death. They clutched at each other. Tersus didn't think he had ever seen a people so wretched. They wore identical tunics, filthy and ragged. They stank of misery and fear. There was no hope in their eyes.

'Do not fight,' Tersus said. 'If you do not fight, you will not be harmed.'

When he saw their reaction, he realised this must have been the first time they had been given a promise instead of a threat. Now every soul in the chamber knelt. They shouted things he could not hear, because their voices were too weak, and were drowned out by the vox-speakers. He understood easily enough that the people were crying to him in gratitude.

'Battle-Captain Tersus,' said a voice in his ear bead.

‘Go ahead, Arkus.’ The legionary was scouting ahead with three other battle-brothers.

‘We have found an access chamber. Just beyond the next junction. The enemy is present in the thousands.’

‘Prepare the munitions,’ he said. Then he addressed the people in the dormitory once more, raising the volume of his vox-caster so that his voice became a terrifying boom. Something much worse than bolter fire was about to be unleashed in their vicinity. ‘As you value your lives, keep this door sealed. You will hear screams. Do not open this door until those screams stop.’

From the looks on their faces, he doubted anyone would open the chamber voluntarily again.

He stepped back and pulled the door shut with a loud clang, sealing the people away from the monstrosity that was coming.

When you find the nodes, Mortarion had said, *and the enemy is gathered, you will use the weapons of annihilation.*

The extremes of the campaign ate at Tersus. But Mortarion’s commands were not to be disobeyed, and the access chamber was one of those nodes where the extremes were to be deployed. Tersus voxed the order.

‘Launch the phosphex grenades,’ he said. *Now, I too am the horror of Death.*

It was taking too long. Barrazin wanted the opportunity to strike a massive blow against the defenders, and it wasn’t coming. After a day of fighting, their progress through the hive was almost drudgery. Almost, because there was satisfaction in destroying the troops of the Order. Mortarion had commanded that they must all die, and Barrazin was making certain that they did.

‘Kill the invaders. All of Galaspar must fight.’

The waves of attackers kept coming, driven forward by the vox-speakers. Barrazin’s squad had to move against a constant series of attacks. There was never a pause. That and the determination of the fighters made him hopeful that his squad was on the right track.

They don’t want us reaching somewhere. It was that or his squad was moving up an infinitely supplied river of troops. The surges came, and were destroyed, over and over. For a short while, after the Order’s command to

the general populace had started broadcasting, the battles had been the straightforward annihilation of a mob. Some of the fighters they encountered wore no armour or uniform, and fought with clubs, wrenches or whatever improvised weapons had come to hand. After a handful of massacres, these fighters became fewer.

Marching beside Barrazin, Typhon pointed at the body of one of those defenders. The man clutched a worker's sledgehammer. 'Do you think those are civilians?'

'If they are, they should not have fought for their oppressors. We don't have the time to distinguish between fighters. If they raise a hand against us, they die.'

They turned a corner into a much wider corridor. Two squat turrets guarded the heavy door behind them. Barrazin ducked back just as heavy stubbers opened fire. The shells slammed into the wall to his right, biting out large chunks of masonry.

'A strongpoint,' Barrazin said. The door intrigued him. 'Some kind of redoubt, I'm thinking.' A redoubt implied something worth defending. Perhaps one of the access points Mortarion had tasked him to find. He grinned.

'So, they can do more than just throw bodies at us,' said Typhon.

'Good for them,' said Barrazin. 'A bit of variety.' He raised his voice. 'Brother Avanek, you're needed.'

The Dreadnought moved up from the back of the squad, his heavy steps cracking the rockcrete floor. Like most of the Dreadnoughts of the Death Guard, he was Terran. There had been little opportunity for any of the recruits from Barbarus to undergo the kind of catastrophic injury that would make them candidates for such a transformation. Avanek had embraced the arrival of Mortarion and the changes he brought to the XIV Legion enthusiastically. He had no lingering nostalgia for the Dusk Raiders. To Barrazin, it seemed as if Avanek were truly a son of Barbarus who, through an act of fate, happened to have been born on Terra. Avanek, Barrazin thought, represented the future of the Death Guard. *He understands the new unity of purpose we must embrace.*

Avanek lurched around the corner. He answered the hail of heavy stubber fire with a missile launcher and a blast from his plasma cannon. Explosions shook the corridor. *'Annoyance neutralised,'* said Avanek, his metallic

voice flat and rough as a grave marker.

Barrazin rounded the corner again. The turrets were slag, and the metal door, a metre thick, had been ripped open as though it were cloth. Order troopers boiled out from inside, guns blazing. Barrazin charged at them, his squad a single, unified fist behind him. Their bolter fire knocked the defenders back. Barrazin's hand flamer washed over the foe, turning them into jerking, agonised puppets, and the Death Guard barrelled into the fortress.

Now the redoubt was a trap. It had not been built to repel anyone who was already inside. That any rebellion, itself already an impossibility, could ever get past the turrets was beyond the imagination of the Order. So too was the possibility of an enemy with superior armament.

The compact fortress belonged to the Death Guard from the moment the legionaries crossed its threshold.

The slaughter was quick and total. The halls of the redoubt were cramped. In his Terminator armour, Barrazin came close to filling the space, and Avanek was restricted to the main passage leading to the rear of the strongpoint. Striding down the hall, flamer sending death roaring ahead of him, Barrazin backed the defenders up until there was nowhere left for them to run, and then he incinerated them.

The rest of the squad purged the other halls of life, the blows of their power scythes coating the walls with blood, shards of bone and flecks of disintegrated flesh. Within minutes, the redoubt stank of death, the air humid with evaporated gore. The squad regrouped in the central passage.

Taking the ground was the same as holding it. There was no need to leave any legionaries behind to guard captured points. There were no defenders left alive in the squad's path to attempt to retake the fortress.

There was another heavy door on the far side of the redoubt.

'Let's see what they were meant to defend,' said Barrazin. He dragged the blade of his power scythe down the centre, slicing explosively through metal. He attacked the door again, destroying it as though he were shredding cloth. Beyond it was the largest space Barrazin had seen since leaving the *Fourth Horseman*.

'Ah,' said Barrazin, eyeing the access chamber and the massed troops inside. 'Perfect.'

The access chambers were the nerve centres of the hive's defence. They were mustering points, gathering tens of thousands of soldiers and more for a concerted massed assault. Each was also the nexus for a score of major corridors. The huge spaces provided the defenders with the means to reach an entire quadrant of the hive quickly. The speed with which the enemy responded to the invasion, despite the catastrophic damage to the hive, had led Mortarion to suspect the Order had a network along these lines. A number of squads had confirmed their presence. The one he and his Deathshroud saw before them was of another order entirely to what the other units of the Death Guard had seen.

He and his ten Deathshroud Terminators had just smashed through another heavily defended bulkhead. Beyond it, the space of the city opened up. Mortarion stopped just inside the tunnel. The access chamber was not really a chamber at all. It was a vast square surrounded on all sides by fortress walls. A hundred tanks were lined up in rows, their cannons all facing Mortarion. Broad avenues led off the square to take the heavy armour to its appointed positions, but the tanks were not leaving, and more were arriving. *This* was their destination.

'We are expected,' Mortarion said to the Deathshroud.

A moment later, a series of explosions went off behind him, and the tunnel collapsed, blocking the way back.

'No one can retreat before death,' said Mortarion. 'The enemy is wrong to think I would seek to.' Then he leapt out of the tunnel, into the open expanse. The front row of tanks rumbled forward at the same time. Their guns were flamer cannons, and they opened fire together, bathing the wall with burning promethium.

'Forward!' Mortarion shouted to his legionaries. 'There is no evasion. There is only retribution!'

Flame washed over him. He drove through the inferno, and the force of the blast sought to push him back. His armour's temperature soared, and pain was a deep crimson. He charged without pause, without mercy, and in another moment he could see again as he came through the fire. He jumped, and landed on the turret of the tank in front of him. He swung *Silence* down, and the battle scythe's blade sliced through the turret. With two more blows, he had cut the tank wide open, the metal peeled back as if it were as weak as flesh. The crew looked up at him in horror, and his next swipe killed

them all, spraying the interior with blood as their bodies burst apart.

As he leapt onto the next tank, Mortarion tracked the attacks of the Deathshroud. On either side of him, the Terminators were following his lead, and they were punching a gap through the front ranks of the heavy armour. Already, though, there were only eight of the Deathshroud engaged in the fight. Two had fallen to the flamers.

Mortarion killed a second tank in the same way that he had the first. Before he could leap again, an engine screamed from the sudden demands placed on it and a tank with a raised dozer blade charged at him from just ahead. It slammed into the flamer tank and overturned it. Mortarion threw himself to the left, but he wasn't fast enough. The force of the siege-vehicle's blow compressed the promethium reservoir, ruptured it and ignited it. The combined force of the hit and the explosion flipped the flamer tank over, and it came down on Mortarion. Tonnes of metal hammered him to the floor of the access chamber, cratering the rockcrete. Flame surrounded him, eager to consume him this time. He strained and lifted the corpse of the vehicle. He lunged forward out from under the wreckage only to be caught by another siege blade. It lifted him high as the tank roared towards another. This one had a colossal battering ram instead of a cannon, and it collided with the siege blade, crushing Mortarion between the tanks.

Everything was black and red. He couldn't breathe. Somewhere far away the engines howled, and treads shrieked for grip on rockcrete. The pressure mounted. He was pinned, and had no leverage.

The ram held his left arm down against his side. He had just enough movement in his hand to pull the *Lantern* out of its holster. He fired backwards, the energy blast punching through the siege blade and into the body of the tank. There was another explosion, and the blade was no longer pushing forward. Mortarion fired again, and the tank disintegrated. The ram vehicle rushed ahead, and Mortarion pushed off. He landed to one side, and hurled a graviton grenade at the massive tank as it sped by him. The weapon imploded, and so did the tank, a localised gravity field crushing it with its own mass. The screams of the crew inside were loud enough for Mortarion to hear before they were smashed to liquid pulp. In seconds, the tank was a shapeless mass of compacted metal.

He jumped onto another flamer tank before it could train its cannon on

him, and he took a second to scan the chamber. The ranks of the Order's heavy armour were breaking down, vehicles colliding with each other in the effort to kill or escape the warriors of the Death Guard. But they were not defeated. Their numbers were still overwhelming, and two more of the Deathshroud had vanished beneath their treads and guns.

Mortarion pulled the heaviest of his explosives from his belt. 'Vortex,' he voxed, a warning to the squad. 'Centre of the chamber.' He threw the sphere in a high arc.

It came down where he had said and exploded just above the tanks. It tore a rift in the materium. An infinitesimal point of nothing became a gaping black maw in a fraction of a second, surrounded by a maelstrom of tortured reality. The spiral forces ripped tanks apart. The hunger of the empyrean consumed machine and mortal, and the vortex grew as it fed, dominating the entire centre of the chamber.

Mayhem swept through the forces of the Order. The panic of the drivers sent tanks careening into each other in their struggle to escape. The vortex grew wider, taking more tanks. Mortarion felt the entire being of the huge square begin to lean towards the ravening warp squall. Then the vortex began to move, crawling over the square in a slow arc. It would jerk suddenly to the left and right, as if leaping on prey, and then resume its slow journey. Reality howled as it died and fell into the vortex, but the death cry was not so loud that Mortarion could not hear the screams of the enemy.

Soldiers leapt from entangled, trapped and stalled tanks, and tried to flee. From his position on the wreckage, Mortarion addressed them, the vox-caster of his armour sending his cold voice across the square. 'You are the slaves of the Order,' he announced. 'You are slaves, yet you perpetuate the greater slavery. You fight for its continuance. For that, you are judged. For that, you are condemned. For that, this is your sentence.'

He raised *Silence* and rushed to the nearest tank to slash open its hull. 'Finish them all,' he voxed to the Deathshroud.

Using a Nihilus weapon like the vortex grenade was dangerous. There was no predicting the behaviour of what the weapon conjured. The movement, duration and intensity of the vortex was subject to the whim of the empyrean. The soldiers of the Order panicked, and that doomed them. Mortarion and the Deathshroud kept their distance from the maelstrom, and completed the sentence. There was no longer any organised response from

the enemy. Individual tanks tried to fight back as Mortarion came for them. They had no chance.

The vortex was still present when the last tank had been reduced to a smouldering wreck, but it was diminishing. It would be gone soon, and present no further danger to the hive. At the far end of the square, the avenues led upward to the higher levels of Protarkos. At the highest exit point, Mortarion took one more look at the massacre he was leaving behind. Death had truly stalked the access chamber, and taken its full harvest.

Good.

‘Why are we doing this?’ Scrape asked. Not for the first time. But after a day of running down the corridors in the wake of the giants, he clearly felt he was entitled to ask again.

Though there were the sounds of struggle ahead, and the booming of guns was deafening in the more confined spaces, there was also an almost tactile sense of silence where the giants had passed. They had left a trail of death in their wake. Bodies lay shot to pieces and trampled beneath heavy boots. Blood coated the floor. The scars of fire blackened the walls.

‘You don’t have to come,’ Digger said to Scrape. She had lost track of Death some time ago. Though his figure had been out of her sight almost immediately, now and then his terrible cold voice would echo through the hive, and tell her what route to take. But as the hours passed, that too faded away. She could not catch up. But she kept trying.

‘But why are we doing this?’ Scrape repeated.

‘I have to see.’

‘But that is Death we’ve been following.’

Good. Scrape knew it too. That made it real.

‘We should be fleeing Death,’ said Scrape, though he kept up and did not turn away.

‘Death is killing the Order,’ Digger said. ‘Don’t you want to see that happen? I do.’

‘I’m scared.’

‘Me too. But what else can we do?’ She meant that. All they could do was follow. ‘Where will you go if not here?’

Scrape didn’t answer.

Digger could have added that she didn’t think they would find Death

himself again. Scrape probably knew that too, and that was why he still ran with her, somehow comforted by the idea that they would not come face to face with the object of his terror. They could still follow the paths of the giants, though. That was not hard. They could still witness what the servants of Death were doing to the Order.

They paused at a junction point, then turned right, following the smell of butchery and spent fyceline. They ran past burned walls, burned flesh, burned bones. So many bodies had huge holes in them, or no heads at all. Digger had seen what stubber fire did to people. So had Scrape. Every labour unit had, at some point. They saw what it did to other units who failed to obey as well as they should. These wounds were too huge to have been caused by stubbers. The weapons of Death were terrible.

Digger slipped and fell in a pool of blood. She got up, coated in gore, and there were screams ahead. They were screams of fear, and of despair. She grinned. ‘Do you hear?’ she asked Scrape.

He nodded.

‘The Order is screaming,’ she said.

She ran faster. She had no thoughts of trying to keep a safe distance. Her worry was that she and Scrape would fall so far back that all they would ever see was what was left behind by the passage of the war. It wasn’t over yet, at least. The sounds of battle called her forward, and there were always more corpses to show the way.

The sector they were moving through was one of the dormitory warrens, a maze of low halls running between the packed sleeping warehouses and cells in a region between manufactoria. The walls were dank, dark rockcrete, cracked and seeping. Every hall was the same, an endless web of crowded misery. And Death was killing the lords of misery.

‘What’s that?’ said Scrape.

‘I don’t know.’

They faltered and stopped.

A new sound had entered the war. There had been the concussive thunder of explosions, followed by the worst screams Digger had ever heard. And now there was a gurgling, hissing noise. It sounded like something alive.

‘Do you still want to see this?’ Scrape asked.

Digger hesitated. ‘Yes,’ she decided. She must see the Order suffer. She must see what she had never hoped to dream.

So, she kept going, and Scrape followed. At the next intersection, she turned right, following the hissing, a fearful wonder growing in her heart. There were still no giants ahead. This wasn't the right path yet, but the sounds were louder. She ran faster, sprinting past all the shut doors of the dormitories. Now and then, fearful eyes appeared at viewing slits. Digger gestured to them. 'Follow us!' she shouted.

No one did.

'Kill the invaders. All Galaspar must fight.' The call had resounded all the time she had been in the tunnels. Even now, the novelty of disobedience had not worn off. And if no one was joining her and Scrape, they weren't obeying the Order, either. Some must have, at first. Not all the dead she had seen in the halls were soldiers. But that was early in her chase through the corridors. The sight of the giants and their power had given her fellow labour units the courage to ignore the command.

'Everybody is disobeying,' she said to Scrape as they ran. '*Everybody!*'

Panting, he didn't answer. But he nodded. He was excited too. This was another impossible thing that had become real.

The hissing was louder. There was a glow, green and white, coming from somewhere ahead. Digger had never seen that kind of light before. She slowed down. There were screams still, not as many as before, but closer.

Digger stopped moving. She and Scrape were part way down a corridor that ran straight ahead for several hundred metres before ending at a T-junction. On both sides were dozens of doors to the prison-like dormitories, shut fast. The glow was bright now. The gurgling hiss belonged to a monstrous beast. The screams were too close.

'What do you think we should–' Scrape began.

Soldiers came pounding around the right-hand corner. Scrape yelped, and Digger held her breath, waiting for the shot that would kill her. But the soldiers were unarmed. They weren't charging to attack. They were fleeing. They kept looking back at the growing light.

The screams were almost as loud as the hissing now.

'Go!' Digger yelled. She and Scrape ran again, back the way they had come, and she had to look over her shoulder too and she already knew that she could never run fast enough.

The monster flowed into the corridor. Liquid green fire flowed over soldiers, swallowing them up and *melting* them. Their screams clawed at

Digger’s mind, and she screamed too in the knowledge that soon she would be joining the troops with a more awful and final cry.

The liquid flame was too fast. It could not be outrun. It was not much more than a hundred metres away now. She turned to the nearest door and hammered on it. ‘Let us in!’ she cried. ‘Let us in!’ Scrape followed her example and pounded on the next door. Slits opened, then shut again.

They moved on to the next doors, and then the next, their shrieks more and more desperate, and the river of death was closer and closer. It had consumed the last of the soldiers. Digger could barely hear her cries above the hissing.

They were going to die. Death had come for everyone.

Digger sobbed. She was a fool to have thought she could see Death and not pay for gazing on the forbidden.

Her knuckles bled from pounding. The light of pain was almost upon her. When she breathed, a stench that stabbed like knives filled her nose and lungs. Her eyes teared.

A door slid open. Scrape lunged in, but the coming of Death held her mesmerised for a fatal second. The green fire reached for her, and when she moved, the smallest droplets of its advance caressed her right side.

The agony was transcendent. It was beyond words, beyond sensation. It burned through her arm and leg. Her fingers melted away, and her flesh dripped like candle wax. She screamed, and the scream contained something more than pain, because pain was too weak an idea to contain what was happening to her. She was taken by revelation, by the terrible, wailing birth of religion.

She stumbled into the chamber and fell, somehow still able to see even as she writhed in the devouring flame. Scrape helped the other labour units slam the door shut again. A moment later, the hissing arrived outside. The green flame was flowing down the corridor.

The dormitory was so crowded, everyone but Digger was standing. As one, the crowd pushed back, away from the door. People moaned, suffocating in the crush. Scrape dragged Digger from the door, and the hissing grew louder than her screams.

The black metal of the door glowed sickly green. The temperature in the dormitory spiked. The door began to smoulder. Then the metal began to burn, flames the colour of putrescence licking around the edge of the door

frame, slowly spreading further across its width. Digger thrashed, and it seemed to her that the killer in the hall heard her. The hissing grew louder and louder.

And then it faded.

As it did, the worst of Digger's pain receded. She no longer burned, and the nerves of her damaged limbs were gone. Her right arm had vanished below the elbow. Her leg was black and oozing. Eaten away, just as she was, the remains of the door fell backwards out of the frame with a clang. It continued to smoulder in the diminishing puddle of flame on the floor of the hall. On the other side of the corridor, the door to another dormitory had also fallen in. But the hissing had stopped.

Digger's screams fell to moans, and she could draw breaths that were almost normal between them.

After another few minutes, the terrible smell faded too. The monster had passed. Its taint remained.

Digger curled up in a ball, left arm squeezing her knees tightly against her chest. She rocked back and forth, crying out.

But not all her cries were of distress. The touch of the numinous stayed with her. What she had felt was a fraction of what was happening to the Order. She thought of the soldiers, running for their lives, the flowing horror seeming to lunge at them with greater hunger the faster they ran. They had been devoured. She had not. In her delirium of pain, she thought that the flame had burned the shackles of the Order from her.

The hive vibrated. It boomed with the thunder of conquest. In the distance, there were screams again. Digger's cries became laughter.

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EIGHT

Beyond the access chamber were wide avenues and more labyrinthine corridors, always moving up, and always filled with the Order's soldiers, fruitlessly hurling themselves forward to be slaughtered. The XIV Legion's progress was good, but it was not enough. The day was gone. There remained only the night to bring an end to the reign of the Order in Protarkos.

Mortarion and the Deathshroud had routed another ambush when both Barrazin and Tersus voxed in that they too had found and purged access chambers.

'Do either of your chambers have routes heading downward?' Mortarion asked.

'Yes,' said Barrazin. *'There are grav-lift platforms here, large enough to hold hundreds at once. They were in use when we arrived, and were about to send another contingent down.'*

'That sounds like they're desperate to keep us away from the generators,' said Tersus.

'Their desperation points us towards victory,' said Mortarion. 'First Captain Barrazin, gather your company's forces and head down. Destroy

the generators. Plunge your scythe into the heart of the enemy.’

‘So ordered, Lord Mortarion.’

Mortarion kept moving. This hall was another that sloped steeply upwards. He climbed, and the walls of the corridor were crusted with grime. The air inside the hive was foetid, dense with bodies and misery.

Mortarion thought about another climb, through a different kind of toxic air.

He thought about Barbarus and Galaspar.

The differences were great. Galaspar was an industrial waste. It had been ruined by its inhabitants. It wasn’t a world whose hostility to human life was innate. And the Order was a human evil. The charnel lords of Barbarus had played with mortals like gods. The leaders of the Order could not boast of such things. There was nothing godlike about them, except perhaps their arrogance. Other than in their numbers, they were weak.

So why compare them?

Because of the tyranny. The total oppression, and the assumption of ownership. The Order and the Overlords had the same view of the inhabitants of their respective planets. The downtrodden were there to be used at the masters’ pleasure, and that was the sum total of meaning of their existence.

And there was more. He had not freed Barbarus. The Emperor had finished the task for him.

Galaspar would be different. Galaspar was his choice. *He* had seen the need to intervene, and he had come here. He would destroy this tyranny. Though it was human, it was as absolute as the horror that had reigned on Barbarus.

This was the task he would complete. This was the act that would be *his.*

A thousand legionaries of the First Great Company mustered in the access chamber. It took less than an hour for them to gather. Barrazin was still made impatient by the wait. It was time that wasn’t being used to push forward. It was time being given to the Order to organise a better defence.

There was room on the two grav-lift platforms for five hundred of them to make the descent at one time. Barrazin stepped onto the northern platform. He kicked aside some dead-trooper sludge and signalled for the drop to begin. With a jerk, the grav-

lift dropped into the shaft. It fell quickly. Barrazin glanced up, and guessed that they had already travelled over thirty metres in the first few seconds.

There was something to be said for the Order's technology. It was going to deliver him to the next battle with no further waste of time.

'Do you think they were able to transfer a large number of their troops below before we scoured the chamber, First Captain?' Calas Typhon asked.

'I hope so,' said Barrazin. 'We wouldn't want to have gathered for nothing.'

The lift descended even faster. Barrazin felt himself grow lighter. The metal walls of the shaft blurred past. The platform was taking him down into the depths of the hive. This was promising.

And if there isn't anything worth capturing or destroying?

The augur readings were too favourable for that to happen.

When the deceleration came, it was brutal. The grav-lift braked at the last possible moment. Barrazin felt the jolt. It must have stopped just shy of breaking the bones of the mortal soldiers who travelled in it.

The Order believed in speed, clearly. Soldiers who were not strong enough to handle the descent were already failures, and would have served no purpose in combat. And there were always more of them.

Always more of them to slaughter.

The legionaries from Barbarus under Barrazin's command took to the extermination of the enemy with a purpose that was stronger than those of their Terran brothers. They fought with the memory of their home world, and what had persecuted them there. They knew that mercy was a weakness, and death a liberation. The campaign on Galaspar was confirming Barrazin's conviction that the new recruits were correct. Even before Galaspar, he had come to favour the power scythe as a weapon and symbol of the new Death Guard. There was satisfaction, too, in marching over these weaklings. There was satisfaction in the feeling of power that accompanied their annihilation.

The platforms came to a stop in another mustering hall. The legionaries marched off the lifts, and the lifts rose again to bring more battle-brothers down.

The hall was cavernous and empty. Other than the grav-lifts, there was nothing here. The lifts took up most of the centre of the room, with wide avenues on either side for the quick movement of troops. On the walls to

Barrazin's left and right were immense bay doors. When they rose, the exits would be wide enough for a line of fifty legionaries abreast to pass through.

'Left or right?' said Typhon.

'Our position puts us close to the middle of the energy signatures,' said Barrazin. He shrugged. 'Left,' he said. 'Let us see what gifts will await us there.'

He waited for the rest of the thousand to arrive, and when they had formed up, he led the march towards the door. The advance had barely started when the door rose on its own. It did so with surprising speed, gears screaming in protest. On the other side was a massive battery of cannons. Rows of barrels were mounted one on top of the other. A wall of artillery pointed straight into the hall.

Barrazin threw himself down. All the guns fired at once. A storm of plasma fire exploded across the chamber. It set the air on fire, and collapsed the opposite wall, melting it to slag in an instant. Against one of those cannons, a legionary's armour would have withstood a first hit. Against all of them at once, there was no chance. The blistering volley shot by bare inches above Barrazin. His auto-senses flashed red, a brief strobe of lethal danger.

Not all his Death Guard ducked in time. There was no shelter. There was only the need to get low and do it fast. Strangled cries over the vox told a story of casualties. Electronic screams of rage came from the Dreadnoughts. There was no moving out of the line of fire for them. They had to withstand it or die. One of them, Berax, stomped forward against the blaster storm. One of his arms, a lascannon, swung back and forth, half severed and useless. He flailed his power claw in anger, smashing the walls. He marched into the fire all the way to the front of the line, and then fell at last, a smoking ruin, just ahead of Barrazin.

'Thank you, brother,' Barrazin murmured. The inert carapace of the Dreadnought gave him some shelter, and he was able to crawl forward. 'Your death will mean theirs,' he said. 'You shield me, and I will make them answer. Now, brother, if you can hear me, your vengeance falls upon them.'

Barrazin grabbed a phosphex bomb from his belt and hurled it over the Dreadnought, at the cannons. The throw was a guess. He couldn't raise himself to see his target or he would lose his head to the blaster stream. But

the bomb didn’t have to go far, and it didn’t have to be accurate.

The bomb burst. The liquid fire spread. If there were screams, Barrazin didn’t hear them. There must have been screams, because the blaster cannons faltered. The soldiers operating them were dying. The phosphex burned through the frameworks of the guns, and the barrels drooped, then fell on each other. Then the fire ate through to their power supplies, and the battery exploded. Massive pieces of shrapnel slashed through the hall, almost as dangerous as the energy beams had been. The fireball expanded through the doorway and into the room, shot through with brilliant green discharges.

In its wake, Barrazin leapt to his feet and stormed the doorway, his brothers behind him, even more dangerous now that some of them had been lost, sons of Terra and of Barbarus united in purpose. He hurled a pair of rad grenades ahead of him and brought up his hand flamer. He launched flame and chem poisons into the space beyond the destroyed battery, and was rewarded with audible screams this time, heard the deaths of the soldiers who had rushed forward to try to stop what could not be stopped.

The Death Guard entered a colossal space, many times larger than the hall they had left. The air crackled and was sharp with the smell of ozone. A hum, deep and powerful, loud enough to cancel all but the loudest of competing noises, made Barrazin’s bones vibrate. The cathedral-like space was filled with monolithic cylindrical generators. Each of them was at least fifteen metres in diameter, and rose to twice that height. Conduits three metres thick, the branches of metal trees, twisted out of the squat trunks of the generators and spread into the ceiling far above, carrying power to the hive.

Turrets of heavy stubbers protected the generators. They were mounted in rows along their heights, and they opened fire. Shells screamed down at the Death Guard from every direction. The drug-fuelled soldiers of the Order rushed forward, thousands of them. The turret fire cut into them too, but they didn’t notice their fellows dying. Their minds were so enflamed by the war-chems that their sole remaining instinct was to charge the invaders and kill them.

‘Squads in circle formations,’ Barrazin ordered. ‘Focus on the turrets. Spread out and kill the generators.’

In tight formations of ten legionaries, the Death Guard advanced. While a

third of the battle-brothers in each circle laid waste to the surrounding soldiers, the others trained their bolters on the turrets, the mass-reactive shells smashing metal and flesh until operators and weapons were taken down, one by one.

The squads fanned out through the generator hall like a virus. As they passed each generator, they planted demolition charges. They moved through the defenders as if wading through water, and the floor of the chamber turned into a tide of blood and smouldering bodies.

Barrazin and his squad were in the centre of the hall when the last of the generators was mined.

'Charges active,' he voxed to the company. 'Trigger them now.'

He grinned when the detonations went off, rippling through the hall like the snap of a monstrous whip. Power lashed out of the generators, and a storm of electrical blasts exploded over the hall. It stopped time. Sheet lightning flashed hard and long. The soldiers of the Order could not see to move or fight. The photo-lenses of Barrazin's helm shielded his vision from the dazzle, but even they had trouble adjusting to the rapid, strobing changes from light to dark.

The storm ended with a huge rumble, the death rattle of leviathans. The generators were silent. Darkness was absolute.

Photo-lenses switched to infrared. Barrazin looked at a sea of enemy soldiers. Many were dead, electrocuted. The survivors were wavering and lost. For them, the night was so thick, it could be touched. Barrazin pictured their panic, remembering the stories he had been told of the terrors on Barbarus that his new brothers had experienced before the coming of Mortarion. The dark would be filling the soldiers' eyes. They would feel as if it were reaching in through their noses and mouths, filling their lungs so they couldn't breathe. The darkness would taste like panic, and the panic would be made worse by war-chems urging them to fight but stripping away their ability to think rationally.

In utter disarray, the soldiers started shooting, firing without direction. They ran into each other, and they killed each other. There were still thousands of them in the generator hall. They were no longer a threat. They were barely an obstacle.

'Put an end to them,' Barrazin ordered.

The slaughter was quick.

After the trauma of the ship's collision with the hive, the war was distant enough that Stevang and the other High Comptrollers regained some of their composure. The fighting still could not be heard in the command centre. The war came to the centre only in reports from officers commanding the defence, and as picts relayed by surveillance lenses. The lenses were going down all over the hive, destroyed almost as soon as the invaders appeared within the frame. There was enough information getting through, however, for Stevang to get a sense of how badly the Order was losing.

His fellow comptrollers knew it too.

'They *can* die,' said Yvas Restavan, Comptroller for Manufactoria. He spoke with a whine, needing someone to confirm what he said and give him hope. 'The heavy stubbers and the cannons take them down.'

'Yes,' said Uvalliat. 'But the heavy stubbers and the cannons never last long enough to make a real difference.' She sighed. 'Our waves of soldiers slow them down a little bit. That's all.'

The lights in the command centre blinked off. The hololithic table and every screen in the chamber went dark. The only light came through the dome, frosted with cracks. Outside, the dust storms had settled, but the clouds still burned, illuminating the night with a dirty red glow.

'Oh no,' Restavan moaned. Everyone else said nothing. They stood still.

Have they come for us? Stevang wondered. *Did they get here so soon?*

After ten seconds that turned into a lifetime, the screens came back to life and light returned. Stevang heaved a sigh of relief. 'Tell me what just happened,' he commanded. The strength of his tone pleased him.

'We've lost the primary generators,' said a technician. 'The centre is running on its local power supply now.'

'What about the rest of the hive?'

'Most of it has gone dark.'

'What can we see?'

'Almost nothing, Lord Comptroller. We've lost the lenses too.'

Stevang's jaw clenched in frustration. He stared down at the hololithic table as it stuttered back to life. The information it showed was out of date and growing staler by the second. With a snarl, he swiped the air savagely over the table, and the hololithic runes and map vanished. Displays of the war inside the hive were useless now.

He took a breath, fighting down the nausea of fear. ‘How long until the reinforcements from the other hives get here?’ He thought about Peitharchia. It was the nearest of the hives and had mobilised the instant Protarkos had come under attack. Its army had to be close. It *had* to be.

Unless it waited for the forces of the other hives to join it…

No. No, there had been no word of that from High Comptroller Tosarrat. His transmissions had all said that he was making all due haste at the head of his forces. He wouldn’t even have to wait. The full mobilisation of the Order would create an army that would cover the land.

‘Recalculating arrivals now from the latest reports, Lord Comptroller,’ said another operator.

‘Send the data to the table.’

‘At once.’

New graphics appeared, displaying Protarkos and its wider environs. Vectors showed the approach of the armies, the speed of their advance, and their estimated arrival time.

‘Not until morning,’ said Uvalliat. ‘Three more hours.’

‘So that is how long we have to hold out,’ said Stevang.

‘That’s too long,’ Restavan said mournfully.

‘It is not,’ Stevang snapped.

Restavan shook his head. ‘We can’t survive until then.’

‘We will,’ said Stevang. Restavan’s weakness helped him. It gave him someone to shame. It gave him the chance to prove his superiority. ‘We have a long three hours ahead,’ he went on. ‘Let us see where we stand, and what we must do to survive them. All is Order.’

‘All is Order,’ the High Comptrollers repeated, with varying degrees of belief.

‘There are still regions where we have eyes. Where are they in relation to this centre?’

The hololithic display changed again. The territory map shrank, and one half of the table projected a map of Protarkos. It was mostly blank. The illuminated regions were a patchwork, showing no clear pattern. Even as Stevang examined the display, another region went dark.

‘We won’t be able to track the enemy’s progress,’ said Uvalliat, confirming what Stevang was thinking. ‘Not with any reliability. There aren’t enough lenses still operational. And a lot of these regions are useless

to us.’ She pointed to a sector in the lower half of the hive, on the opposite side of Protarkos from where the ship had hit. ‘We have eyes here, but there’s no reason for the invaders to go there. We’ll have to rely on reports from officers.’

‘At least we still have communications,’ said Stevang.

‘They’re of limited use,’ said Iveena Belltav, Comptroller of Labour. ‘The officers die almost as soon as they come into contact with the enemy.’

There has not been a single survivor from any of the battles, Stevang thought.

‘Their deaths are information all the same,’ he said. ‘They mark the advances of the enemy.’ He kept his voice strong. ‘And the regions still with power are data that we can use. Look.’ He tapped at the display, and arrows showed the recorded progress of the enemy. ‘Part of the force split off here and descended to destroy the generators.’ The decision to reinforce that point of vulnerability now seemed foolhardy. Perhaps all it had accomplished was to draw the invaders’ attention to the generators. The other enemy units were hugely spread out, and that had allowed them to take vast areas of the hive very quickly. There had been a pattern until the blackout, though. They were moving up. They were gradually converging on the command centre. ‘They are heading for us. Sooner or later, by luck or by design, they will reach this point.’

‘Luck?’ Restavan squeaked with despairing laughter. ‘They have no need of luck!’

Stevang ignored him. ‘We must delay them until the reinforcements arrive.’

‘How?’ said Restavan. ‘Nothing can stop them.’

‘We still have millions to deploy,’ Uvalliat countered.

‘In the dark.’

‘The officers have portable illumination,’ said Stevang. ‘They’ll get it distributed.’ They had to.

‘But how will that help?’ Restavan complained. ‘How will the millions help? Nothing has stopped the invaders.’

‘We just need to slow them down enough,’ Stevang said. He pointed to the other side of the table, where the lines of the armies were making for Protarkos. ‘We have to use our numbers while we still can. We’ve lost the generators. That means the only thing left to defend is us.’ He knew that

would placate Restavan. ‘We have to move our forces while we still can, and concentrate them in blocking the enemy’s path here.’

‘The protection we do have in the vicinity is strong too,’ said Belltav. ‘The troops have heavy gun turrets.’

‘That isn’t enough,’ Uvalliat told her. ‘Nothing is enough, except what is coming. If they can be killed by heavy stubbers, they will be destroyed in short order by the might of our armies. The reinforcements must turn their cannons on Protarkos.’

‘The damage to the city from an artillery barrage on that scale…’ said Restavan.

‘The destruction will be nearly total,’ Stevang said. Tens of thousands of tanks would aim their cannons at the city. He shrugged. ‘That can’t be helped.’

‘Then we’ll die along with it. We’ll die to save Galaspar.’ Restavan’s bravado fooled no one. He wasn’t seeking confirmation this time. He desperately needed to be told he was wrong. The sweat of fear stood out on his brow. His breathing was shallow and too rapid.

‘We aren’t going to die,’ Stevang said. ‘We have a measure we can yet take. It will protect us when the rest of Protarkos burns, and it will keep the enemy at bay long enough for our mechanised armies to arrive.’

Restavan looked hopeful and uneasy at the same time. He knew what that measure was. He simply hadn’t contemplated it until now, or considered what its use might mean.

In all its history, the Order had never foreseen an invasion reaching Galaspar. It was an article of faith that any invaders would be destroyed in the outer system, or at the very worst be annihilated by the planet’s defences. An enemy from outside the empire setting foot on Galaspar’s soil had been unthinkable.

What had been thought about, obsessively, was the possibility of a rebellion. What if the enslaved billions rose up? Every precaution was taken against that bad dream. Measures were taken to make it impossible. Still more were taken to ensure that if somehow a rebellion occurred, there was no conceivable way for it to succeed.

The labour units were drugged so they could not think to fight back. If the drugs failed, or, as was more greatly feared by the High Comptrollers in power, if there was betrayal higher in the social ranks, then there had to be a

way to ensure that the rebellion could not seize anything.

‘Seal us in,’ said Stevang.

‘But–’ Restavan began.

‘The order has been given,’ said Stevang. ‘The die is cast.’

He exchanged a look with Uvalliat. She was thinking, as he was, of their offspring. The Lord Comptroller’s residence was outside the section of the tower that was going to be sealed. He grimaced. There was nothing to be done, so there was no sense wasting mental energy on the matter.

‘If they survive,’ he said, ‘then they will have proven their value.’

She nodded. ‘If they do not, they were not worthy of their position.’

‘All is Order,’ said Stevang.

‘All is Order.’

The walls and floor trembled. The command platform lowered the High Comptrollers back to the sunken position in the chamber, and the ceiling cut them off from the dome once again. The trembling grew strong as massive gears lurched into action. They were gears so huge, their actions so drastic, that they could only be used once. They were one of the most colossal feats of construction on Galaspar. They turned, and another platform, the largest and most secret in the hive, began to move. Supported by rows of gigantic pillars, the platform descended, taking the tower down, bringing it inside its bunker-like base. When the command centre was deep inside, more movement occurred above, and the walls of the shaft came together. Then it was done, and the centre and its generators were encased by rockcrete more than a hundred metres thick.

The gears stopped with a shudder that made itself felt in the centre. The High Comptrollers looked at each other, aware of the finality of what had just happened. Leaving again was not a matter of pulling a simple reversal. The mechanism’s self-induced collapse ensured it could not be used in any way by an outside force. There were escape routes from the centre, but the process of using them was slow and laborious, intended to be used only after the crisis had passed.

The comptrollers and the station operators were there for the duration.

‘They can’t reach us now,’ said Restavan, once again seeking reassurance.

‘You don’t think so?’ Uvalliat gave him a contemptuous look. ‘They landed a ship by ramming Protarkos. If they can do that, they can reach us even now.’

‘Of course they can,’ said Stevang. ‘Our purpose is not to hide from them. There is no victory in that. The goal is *delay.* We just have to hold them off until dawn. Yes, they could reach us, if they had enough time. We won’t let them have it. We will reach them first.’ He looked again at the lines converging on Protarkos. He didn’t care what happened to the hive. This was not his city. It was the site of his command. That was all. It was the planet that belonged to him.

He would destroy every region of Protarkos if that was what he had to do to keep Galaspar. Come the dawn, he would have the means of that destruction. In the meantime, he would give the invaders a taste of what was coming for them. The sealing in of the command centre was just the first step.

There was one more line of defence to unleash on the invaders. ‘Gather the Wretched,’ he said. Their existence was a stain on the Order, yet they were never completely exterminated. They were a force, however disgusting. There had always been, in the elites of Galaspar, the thought that the Wretched might prove to be of use one day. So, they were culled and contained, generation after generation.

Now their day had come.

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NINE

The journey back from the generator hall was long. With the grav-lifts now inactive, the only way up for the company was on foot. On the north-east side of the hall, a shaft went straight up, metal stairs wrapping around its walls in an endless, dizzying spiral. Every fifteen metres or so, the stairs passed a ventilation shaft or a narrow maintenance access door.

Barrazin led the charge up the stairs. Calas Typhon followed close behind.

‘A long climb back to the war, First Captain,’ Typhon said.

‘I share your frustration, legionary. I have hopes it will meet us halfway.’

Barrazin moved faster, as if he sensed the proximity of the hypothetical encounter. Typhon matched his speed. He had faith in the captain. He had led the company well through the slaughterhouse of Protarkos, and he never held back. Typhon had not been certain that the Terran half of the Death Guard could be as ruthless as the situation, and Mortarion, demanded. He had understood that the greater experience of the Terrans meant none of the company captains were from Barbarus yet, but he had been wary, suspicious that they would prove soft. Barrazin had proven him wrong. The First Great Company fought as one, and it fought as the extension of the hand of Mortarion. His spirit infused the Legion.

We are all his sons.

The sound of an explosion came from farther up, muffled behind walls, but still too close to be caused by any of the other Death Guard forces fighting in the upper reaches of the hive. The shaft began to shake, the tremors growing more and more violent, and the air temperature spiked. Barrazin came to a halt. It was the first moment of uncertainty Typhon had seen in him.

‘What is it?’ Typhon asked.

‘I don’t know.’

The rumbling became deafening, and with it came the hiss of a maddened serpent.

Thirty metres up, a bright red glow lit the shaft.

‘Off the stairs!’ Barrazin ordered. ‘Take whatever exit point is nearest! They must have blown apart one of their refineries!’

A cataract of molten ore plunged down the shaft, a monster coming to devour the company.

The nearest maintenance door to Typhon was a few metres back. He sprinted down the stairs, leaping four steps at a time. Barrazin was right behind, shouting into the vox, urging the company to greater speed. The heat of the ore came down like a wall. Typhon was inside the throat of a volcano. His helm’s auto-senses screamed warnings. The howling, roaring, hissing ore was right behind him, and the door was too far away.

The walls of the shaft split. A fissure opened to Typhon’s right, and he threw himself at it. As he leapt, Barrazin’s shout of agony filled the vox, and then the molten orange flood was upon him. Typhon slammed against the sides of the fissure, blind with pain, and then lunged inside, into the breaking structure of the wall. A narrow stream of ore came with him. Typhon pushed through, metal snapped, and he fell into darkness, streamers of ore dropping with him. He hit a crumpled pile of metal, and wreckage came down on him. He pushed back against it, heaving against the mass, bracing hard against being crushed and burned.

Finally, the collapse ended, and the ore leaked away through the cracks beneath him, its brilliance dimming to a sullen red.

Metal creaked over his armour, pressing down like a god’s hand. Typhon steadied his breathing and tried moving. He could see nothing. Cycling through his lenses showed scattered patterns of heat, and nothing else.

When he crawled forward though, there was space before him. There was barely enough for him to force his way through, but it was a path, and he took it.

The vox scratched at Typhon's ear with bursts of frustrating static. He thought he caught a fragment of a transmission, a syllable or two of someone shouting. He tried to answer back. No one responded. The fires and the damage were blocking communications. He was alone.

Typhon had no idea how far he had fallen, or where he was in relation to the others. He moved along the only route he could. It twisted and angled, sometimes going up, sometimes down, and snaked back and forth until he was completely disoriented. All the while, he advanced through utter blackness. He was in a limbo of ruin.

After a while, the space around him widened, and he was able to move more quickly. A sudden slope took him by surprise, and he fell. He dropped through open air briefly, then landed in what felt like a chute. He slid down its length, splashing through brackish water.

When he stopped, there was finally some light, enough for his lenses to amplify and show him where he was. He had landed in what appeared to be an immense waste chamber. The sides, covered with hills of filth, rotting matter and debris, sloped down to a reservoir of stinking sludge, choked with floating detritus. The stench was suffocating, thick enough to chew. A thin layer of green phosphorescent fog floated over the filth.

The chute had deposited Typhon halfway down one slope. He looked up. A few hundred metres up from his position, the floor levelled. That gave him hope of an exit.

He started to climb, slipping when the slimy debris shifted beneath his feet. Midway up, a hill next to him collapsed, and a civilian scuttled out from under it. The scavenger was barely recognisable as a man. His dirt-encrusted skin had the pale, porous quality of mushrooms. It clung to his long frame too tightly, exaggerating the length of his limbs and the angles of his joints. His skull was long and bald. He had no teeth, and his blackened tongue licked at thin, rotten lips. His pupils had expanded to fill his eyes, turning them into orbs of glistening black. They fixed themselves on Typhon. His hands dropped the hunk of dripping matter he had been chewing on, and he cocked his head. He smiled.

'Welcome, welcome,' the creature burbled, his voice thick with phlegm

and amusement. ‘If you have come here, you have come at last.’ He giggled to himself, pleased with his formulation. He pointed at Typhon. ‘I know you! I know you!’

‘I do not think you do,’ Typhon said, and started to move on.

‘But I say I do!’ The man laughed. ‘Does that make it true?’ He could have been asking himself, Typhon, or a phantasm of his rotting mind. He answered himself with sing-song nonsense. ‘Maybe not, maybe so, maybe twixt and threadling so.’

Typhon climbed. The man scrabbled to keep up. ‘But,’ he said. ‘But but but. The question is not how I know you. The question is why such knowledge falls to me. The answer is because you refuse to know yourself.’

Typhon froze. His hand twitched with the impulse to turn his hand flamer on the scavenger. The man cocked his head to the other side and smiled again, as if reading his mind, and Typhon felt something try to shove itself into his head.

The scavenger was a psyker, and one far gone. *This is why Mortarion forbids sorcery. This is what comes of not suppressing the psychic illness.* He knew he should keep going. But a perverse curiosity held him. There was no one else here, no one to see him converse with the mutant. A few more seconds would do no harm.

‘What do you mean?’ Typhon asked.

‘What do I mean?’

‘Why do you say I refuse to know myself?’ The accusation bothered him. There was no need for him to justify himself to this creature. Yet he wanted the scavenger to admit to being wrong.

‘Did I say that?’ The pressure left Typhon’s head as the man turned his interrogation onto himself. ‘Yes, I did. That was rude. That wasn’t a thing to say. How twixt and threadly.’ The psyker shook his head, gave himself a sharp slap on the cheek, and then scampered away. After a few steps, the debris beneath him gave way, and his figure dropped out of sight beneath a slide of foulness.

Typhon stared at the spot where the creature had been. Phosphorescence eddied, then calmed. Flies buzzed in a furious cloud.

Typhon climbed, shaking off a throbbing in his temples. As he reached the top of the slope and trudged onto the level floor, he drew closer once more to the noise of war. Beyond the walls of the waste chamber, engines snarled

and explosions boomed. There was a bay door in the wall opposite Typhon, and he ran towards it.

The wall exploded and a flamer tank burst into the chamber, and then another behind it. The first belched flame at him at close to point-blank range.

Everything went red. A monstrous wind lifted him in the air and slammed him down. Stunned, he heard and saw nothing for long seconds. Then the pain in his head was gone, and he could think clearly again. The sound of engines had vanished too. In its place was the crackle of flame.

Typhon got to his feet. The door to the waste chamber had been blasted open. Between him and the way out lay the smouldering wreckage of tanks. He couldn't tell how many there had been. They seemed to have been rammed together, turned into a fused, twisted mass of metal. Ignited promethium ran in streams from the ruin.

You refuse to know yourself.

The words were less a memory, more a whisper at his ear.

He ran from the chamber, as much to escape the whisper as to find his brothers. He came out into a wide corridor, and two groups of legionaries approached him from either side.

'Your trap was well done, brother,' said one. 'They would have had us blocked some time yet.'

'Opportunity and explosives,' said Typhon. 'You would have done the same, brother.'

Liar. He would not have.

And nor will I. Ever again.

For some time after Barrazin's company took out the generators, the movement of the Death Guard through the hive was rapid. They could see, and the enemy could not. They slammed through the defenders, nightmares incarnate. Mortarion felt the terror and despair of the Order's soldiers as if it were a physical medium through which he raced. It was woven from their screams, and from their deaths. The Order's war-chems were not enough for the slaves to overcome the helplessness they felt before the armoured giants who marched through them. The commanders were not drugged, and their collapse was faster and more damaging. They had always been the creators of fear as they ground the population of Galaspar under their heels. To be

on the receiving end of a massacre was something their minds could not tolerate. Many of them had no light source, and so they were already shrieking with panic before Mortarion descended on them.

For that period in the darkness, Mortarion was no longer waging a campaign against an armed foe. He was exterminating a nest of insects. And as he and the Deathshroud climbed higher, the units of the Death Guard reconverged. He listened to the vox traffic, and read the picture that emerged. Barrazin must still have been far below, as there was no contact from his company. His journey back from the generators would be a long one now that all the grav-lifts were disabled. The rest of the legionaries were all making for a single target.

The hive was almost his. The Order was in disarray.

Once Mortarion reached the base of the central spire, entering through the main hall of a stilled manufactorum, the defence became as intense as it was desperate, and it made no difference. Portable light sources gave the soldiers the chance to see their way forward again, and despite their terror of the Death Guard, they attacked.

They advanced in greater numbers than before, which Mortarion hadn't thought was possible. The numbers were grotesque. The waves of bodies were more like walls. It didn't matter. The goal was in sight, and the numbers were irrelevant. The Order had run out of time. Mortarion and his squad waded through the soldiers, scything them apart. There were so many of them, the air became a thick fog of blood and vaporised flesh.

The great machines of the manufactorum, where hundreds had slaved and died each day, were vast, dark shapes at the edges of Mortarion's sight. The floor squirmed with soldiers, crowded like maggots. He slashed *Silence* back and forth. Bodies exploded before him. He saw more troops pouring into the hall from the far end, a heaving of crimson movement in infrared.

They didn't matter. They were all pointless.

In minutes, he crossed the manufactorum floor through the crimson fog. 'Barrazin,' Mortarion voxed, trying again to reach his First Captain. 'What level of resistance are you encountering?' Tersus had already reported facing the same numbers as Mortarion, as had the other squads closing in on the tower's base.

Barrazin didn't answer. Another voice did. '*First Captain Barrazin is dead, Lord Mortarion. This is Legionary Typhon. The company is*

regrouping and making for your position. There was some resistance, but we have broken it. For some time now, we have not encountered any of the enemy. The hive is ours.'

Mortarion grimaced at the loss of Barrazin. He was a strong unifying presence. But the Death Guard was more than its officers, and it was necessary that more of them should be from Barbarus. 'Understood, legionary,' said Mortarion. 'You are now a sergeant, Calas Typhon.'

The hive is ours.

Not yet. Not in this region. The important one. This was the final attempt to block the Death Guard from reaching the command centre. *They are attempting what you said before, Barrazin. They seek to smother us with corpses. They hope to wall themselves away behind the dead. I am sorry that you cannot know you were correct.*

Mortarion switched the vox-channel to address all his legionaries. 'The Order is desperate, but do not mistake their desperation for defeat. They are playing for time. We will not let them have the victory of delay.'

Beyond the manufactorum, one of the branches led to a wide staircase. It was built to bring hundreds of workers down from the levels above in a rapid flow of marching slaves. Now it was filled with soldiers. They had time for one massed volley with their lasrifles before Mortarion responded with the *Lantern*, and the Deathshroud sent up a barrage with their hand flamers. The chem-loaded promethium burned longer and more ferociously, and released a gas cloud that dissolved the lungs after a single breath. In the silence of the aftermath, as he climbed the smoking rockcrete steps, Mortarion made his recording.

The halls of the hive no longer echoed with the repeating propaganda of the Order. Barrazin had killed that voice. Mortarion created a new message. 'Citizens of Galaspar,' he said, 'your liberation is at hand. The Death Guard has come for the Order. We are its doom. Do not fight us. Do not fear the darkness. Remain behind doors. Stay in shelter. Wait for the dawn, and you will be free.'

When he was finished, he sent the recording across the company vox-channels. 'I want every squad to play this on a loop over vox-casters,' he said. 'Do so for as long as there is an enemy to fight.'

The leaders of every unit voxed their acknowledgment of the orders. The reports were coming in quickly as more and more squads rejoined to form

larger formations.

Then a rumble passed through the hive. Mortarion felt it under his feet as he neared the top of yet another staircase, another one cleansed of life. The vibration was steady, neither increasing nor decreasing. Something massive was moving.

This is the Order's countermove. This is important.

He tore up the last of the stairs. Dread seized him at the thought that despite everything he had done, he had not been fast enough after all.

The stairs ended at iron doors. He smashed them down with a single blow, and stormed into the chamber beyond. As he entered, the vibrations came to a stop with a single, brutal shock to the spine of this region of the hive. The source of the shock seemed close. Very close. When Mortarion entered the chamber, he had the sense that the soldiers within had all witnessed something moments before, and he had just missed it.

The dread grew.

The chamber was a guardroom, built to hold a thousand, and there were a thousand present. Las-turrets flanked the heavy doors on the opposite wall. Mortarion recognised the function of the chamber at once. It was a site for a last stand. There was nothing here except space, space to gather defenders and hurl them against intruders in one final charge. The walls and ceiling were unadorned. There was no furniture at all. Just space, in which to kill and die.

Only a few of the defenders were soldiers. The others were mutated human beings, their flesh twisted in configurations that marked them as those for whom Mortarion had a special hatred. Many of their skulls were swollen so large they bent the necks on which they rested, and some even forced their owners to go about on all fours. Many, too, had third eyes in the centre of the foreheads. The horde moaned, each of its members drowning in the torture that was mere existence. When they cried, the air twisted. Mortarion's view of the doors and the las-turrets distorted, and droplets of blood fell from nowhere.

'Psykers,' Mortarion hissed. The wretched of humankind, sorcery's bodily avatars, fit only for the mercy of extermination.

The soldiers shouted and cracked their whips, and at the same moment that the turrets fired, the hundreds of mutants rushed him. Now Mortarion and the Deathshroud were the focus of their pain. They screamed, and they tore

wounds in the materium. The floor ahead rippled and began to liquefy. Rents in the air disgorged lightning blasts of acid. A spiral warp storm exploded in the centre of the chamber, blocking Mortarion's advance. The storm felt like a special insult, a riposte to the one he had unleashed on the Order with his vortex grenade.

The rift grew wider as Mortarion tried to move around it. A fissure in reality lashed out ahead, and the boiling collisions of the materium and the warp washed their lethal energies over him. The damage cut deep, a psychic scythe turned back on him. The surface of his armour peeled and ran. His being, from his skin to his core, began to unknit. His soul writhed, his mind convulsing with an explosion of painful memories, all of them fragmentary, and all of them as real as the chamber in which he fought. Past and present fused and he fought to distinguish them. The pain from the storm was also the pain as he collapsed, overcome with toxins, before the fortress of his adoptive father on Barbarus.

The storm howled, and it caught one of the Deathshroud, who vanished, without a cry, into the maw of the rift. Mortarion snarled and fought back, through will and strength, against the pain, and he kept moving forward, blood and liquefied flesh flying in a stream behind him.

I will not fall to sorcery.

Not so close to the goal. Not to so foul an attack. He had expunged sorcery on Barbarus. He would here as well.

He staggered on, though he felt himself on the verge of dissolution. He reached the edge of the storm and fired around it with the *Lantern*. Heads exploded at each of its blasts, and the storm trembled. The edge of the rift shrank, and the past began to lose its grip on him, turning back into memories. He lunged forward, and more of the mutants came within his range. He shot them all, and now the storm began to contract. Now he could see the turrets, and in the fragment of time before their aim found him, he fired at them first. The energy blasts melted the barrels, and the turrets blew up, incinerating scores of psykers at a stroke.

The storm vanished. Gasping from the pain of his wounds, Mortarion forced himself not to stagger. A cleft ran down the centre of his chestplate, and through his very core to the most fundamental sense of his being. He felt divided, as if he would rip in half if he stepped wrong, and the physical damage was still the least of the injury.

He snarled and forced himself on to retribution. The mutants screamed in fear now, and the space of the chamber trembled in terror at his advance. His Terminators trained their hand flamers on the soldiers. They sent out a wide fan of fire, and it washed over the psykers. Mortarion marched ahead, framed by the sheets of ignited promethium, and he harvested the blood of the mutated sorcerers with *Silence*. Before he was halfway across the chamber, the doors to the left and right blew in, and more Death Guard squads joined the fray. Soon, still more arrived, Tersus' command among them. In less than a minute, nothing born on Galaspar still lived in the chamber. Green acid trickled away over the stilled floor. The air sobbed, and then quieted.

Mortarion gave himself the luxury of standing still. He breathed deeply and with purpose, forcing his pains to the background of his consciousness, where they would have to remain until the end of the war.

Can you fight? he asked himself.

Yes.

Then fight.

The squads kept arriving. *I should be pleased*, Mortarion thought. His legionaries had all made their way to this point, no matter the path they took, at close to the same time.

He wished he felt satisfaction instead of dread.

We were very fast.

We should have been faster.

Mortarion approached the far doors. They had been badly scorched by the destruction of the turrets, but seemed intact otherwise. Their controls were ruined, but they had been burned out by las-fire. The Order had done this themselves.

Tersus joined him at the door. 'Do you think the command centre is on the other side?' he asked.

'No. I'm sure its protections would be better than this. Yet this was heavily guarded.'

Two legionaries attached demolition charges to the doors, placing them up the centre. The melta bombs went off, the heat turning the metal incandescent blue. It ran like candle wax, and the doors came apart, revealing what they had concealed.

'They were protecting nothing,' Tersus said, confused.

There was only a heavy collapse of rockcrete on the other side.

Mortarion narrowed his eyes. His lips pulled back in a tight grimace of anger. ‘They were,’ he said. ‘One delay protecting another,’ he hissed. ‘They have done well. This was the way up to the command centre. The shaft has been completely collapsed, and it was the only point of ingress. They created a barrier, and then held us back from seeing that barrier. It is almost dawn. Every minute is precious to us, and they have stolen them from us.’ He snarled, then said, ‘I want augur readings.’

One of Tersus’ legionaries ran up and scanned the new configuration inside the tower.

‘Look,’ said Mortarion, pointing to the screen. ‘Nothing but solid rockcrete above us. But see the damage readings in the centre. There was a shaft there. There is no longer.’

‘Still power readings and active signals coming from above,’ Tersus said.

‘Yes. In a very contained region. That is our goal, and one we must reach soon.’

He had barely finished speaking when Legionary Nevak voxed in. Nevak was one of the sentinels posted by the Death Guard on the exterior ramparts of the hive. When Mortarion heard Nevak’s voice, he knew they were too late.

‘Lord Mortarion,’ said Nevak. *‘There is movement to the north-west. Mechanised enemy forces are approaching.’*

It had been a long march through the night. Arravus Tosarrat, High Comptroller of Peitharchia, kept having to hold himself back from ordering the tanks to drive forward at full speed. But that would mean leaving the infantry behind. He would not do that. He would arrive at Protarkos with the full, unified strength of his hive. And the armies of the other hives would not be far behind. Peitharchia was the next largest hive on Galaspar, and the one closest to Protarkos. The glory of the first blow of the counter-attack would come to it, and to its comptroller. As well, because of Peitharchia’s position, Tosarrat had overall command of the field. The final defeat of the enemy would be a credit to Lord Comptroller Stevang, of course, but Tosarrat’s role in saving Protarkos would, he calculated, serve him well with regard to his position within the Order.

Tosarrat wore a full enviro-suit so he could sit in the open turret hatch of

the tank. The suit was hot and uncomfortable. It also kept him alive. The air was so poisonous, it would have killed him in minutes. He wanted to ride where he could see around him. The sight was exhilarating. His tank was in the centre of the front rank. To his left, to his right, and behind him were thousands upon thousands of tanks, their columns stretching as far as he could see in all three directions. Between the columns, soldiers marched, their energy kept high with war-chems. The forces were divided into companies of a thousand tanks and a hundred thousand soldiers, each with its own general. There were millions of them. The army covered the land. The ground shook with the rumble of treads and boots.

And there were millions more not far behind. The armies of the other hives were making good time. They would converge with him very shortly after he arrived at Protarkos. The combined anger of the hives would fall upon the invaders and sweep them from Galaspar. Nothing could stand up to this. With such an army, Tosarrat could ride over cities and smash them flat.

That is what we're going to do. Stevang was clear. Stop at nothing to destroy the enemy. If that means levelling the walls of Protarkos, then knock them down.

The night had been long with expectation. Tosarrat had sat in the turret through all the hours of darkness, unable to see more than the few hundred metres ahead illuminated by the tanks' headlamps. There had been nothing to see except the monotony of the cracked wastes. The corrosive wind had worn the land down to the nub, and in the harsh arc lights of the tanks, the landscape was bleached to the appearance of bone and cracked skin. The hours passed, endless. The reports from Protarkos were grim.

'We will be there,' Tosarrat promised Stevang. 'It will be dawn soon, and we will be there.'

Less than an hour later, the pitch-black of the night gradually gave way to grey, and then a filthy brown light. The tanks' engines seemed to grow louder, as if they were greeting the dawn with their eagerness. Tosarrat leant forward, trying to see further. The air swam with prismatic toxins. Dust clicked against his goggles.

The silhouette of Protarkos gathered itself out of the murk. It began as a shadow, then turned into a behemoth. Tosarrat gaped when he saw the huge ship embedded in its upper reaches like a dagger to the heart. The sight forced a moment of doubt upon him.

If the enemy can do that…

He looked away from the ship. He swept his gaze over the infinity of the army again. That reassured him. It didn't matter what the invaders had accomplished. Their fleet was held at bay by the planetary defences, so they were not invulnerable. Now it was time to punish them for daring to set foot on Galaspar.

Tosarrat dropped down inside the cramped, stinking confines of the tank. 'Do we still have contact with the Lord Comptroller?'

'We do, High Comptroller.' The communications officer gave him the handset.

'We have you in sight,' Tosarrat told Stevang.

'And we have survived the night.' The channel was bursting with static. Even so, Tosarrat could hear the strain and relief fighting each other in Stevang's voice. *'You bring us victory.'*

With Tersus at his side, Mortarion raced to Nevak's observation point. It had been seized only recently, and it did not take long to reach. Access to it was through a hole blasted into the tower base's outer walls. At this height the wind was strong. The poisons in the air of Galaspar blended with the air of Barbarus in Mortarion's rebreather, drawing the ties between this world and Barbarus ever more tightly, intensifying his need to liberate its people.

The ground was difficult to make out in the polluted haze. Even so, the Order's reinforcements were hard to miss. A moving carpet of insects seemed to cover the land to the north-west all the way to the horizon. An army, tremendous in size and might.

In the near distance were some of the planetary defence guns. They fired as Mortarion watched. The immense boom of the cannons rolled over the land. The beat of a drum that kept the fleet away.

The guns recoiled, and the massive reloaders inserted new shells. The slow, heavy, repetitive movements turned the guns into beasts of myth, monsters taking their turns to hurl their fire at gods. From further out, beyond sight, came the echoes of other booms. The Order still had its claws, for all the injuries Mortarion had inflicted upon it.

He looked back and up to the spire of the tower. It was gone.

Tersus said, 'That wasn't destroyed by us, was it?'

'It wasn't destroyed at all,' Mortarion said. The *Fourth Horseman*'s aim

had been true. The Death Guard had struck the hive as high as it was possible to go without destroying the target. Looking at the squat base of the tower, he realised what had happened. ‘They retracted it. That was the vibration we felt earlier.’ The Death Guard had taken the hive except for that one site, and it was the most crucial one. ‘We have to breach this final defence before those forces take the hive down and us with it. We need the support of the fleet.’ He thought about where the signal cluster showed on the augur reading. There had to be thirty metres or more of solid rockcrete between the hidden command centre and the Death Guard’s position. It would take hours to blast through. By then, it would be too late. There had to be a faster way in.

The signal cluster was quite close to the top of spire.

Mortarion examined the exterior of the tower. Defence turrets lined it and the other walls of the hive. The ones below this position were inert, their power cut off. The ones on the tower rotated back and forth, searching. They were being fed by the generators contained within the bunker that had been the tower base. Nevak’s sentinel post was under the shelter of overhanging rockcrete, hidden from the turrets. The guns were powerful, designed to shoot down aircraft approaching the hive. They were not built to pick off warriors scaling the walls. Targeting would be difficult.

But not impossible. Especially if the rulers of the Order were not concerned about damage to the walls. They wouldn’t be, if their protection was thick enough.

Tersus must have been following his gaze. ‘Attack from the outside?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Mortarion. ‘Over the top and down through the roof.’

‘That will still take time.’

‘Yes, but not as much.’ He turned his attention back to the approaching army, and he saw what had to be done. ‘A smaller force can make the ascent,’ he said. ‘If the counter-attack can be delayed for a short while.’ A small force would assail the command centre, while the rest of the legionaries would descend to hold off the tanks. If the heavy armour wasn’t delayed, and it had the chance to hit the exterior of the tower with all the force of its guns, the ascent would fail. If the ascent failed, and the command centre was not seized, everything was lost. The attack on the entire Galaspar System hinged on buying the ascent a little more time.

Mortarion’s fists clenched. He had foreseen the possibility of what he would have to do next. Even so, the necessity angered him. On Barbarus, he had failed to complete the liberation without the intervention of his father because he could not ascend to the fortress in the most toxic heights without collapsing. This would be another ascent he would not finish. It would be an indulgence to lead the squad that would make the climb. He was not needed for that. He was needed where the battle would be most desperate, where the greatest force of the Death Guard must be brought to bear, and where the decisions of command would be most crucial. He had to be down below, on the ground, fighting with fewer than ten thousand troops now against millions on an open battlefield.

‘You know what to do,’ he said to Tersus.

‘I do, Lord Mortarion.’

‘Take a squad. I can spare you no more.’

‘One squad will be enough.’

‘You understand how crucial it is that you take the centre?’

‘I do.’

‘There can be no delay.’ Mortarion did not warn him about hesitating to use phosphex. Tersus had reached the base of the tower almost as quickly as Mortarion had. He trusted his battle-captain to do what had to be done.

‘There will be no delay,’ Tersus said. The promise was heartfelt.

‘Good.’ It was time to go. At least there was one difference between Galaspar and Barbarus. There would be no intervention from a father here. The victory or the defeat would be his alone.

Minutes later, raging, Mortarion descended the mountain.

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TEN

Stevang watched the lines on the hololithic table intersect. The story they told was confirmed by the transmissions from Tosarrat. Dawn had come. The day of victory was here.

The other High Comptrollers stood around the table, watching, like him. They were almost motionless. They had been in this position for a long time now. They had spent the final hours of the night staring at the table, and listening for the sounds of the invaders smashing their way through to the command centre, or the sound of the massed artillery of the Order commencing its shelling of Protarkos. Their heartbeats counted the moments before one or the other happened. They knew the invaders were coming. They no longer had any way of knowing how close that danger was. The extremes of fear and hope knocked them back and forth, exhausting them.

‘Here,’ Stevang said. He pounded the table with satisfaction. ‘Tosarrat is *here.* And we are still standing.’

‘Very soon, we’ll hear the end of the war beginning,’ said Uvalliat.

‘Where will they attack first?’ Restavan asked.

‘Everywhere,’ said Uvalliat. ‘There are the guns for it.’

Stevang nodded, picturing the devastation wrought by thousands of tank cannons firing at once, and repeatedly.

‘There will certainly be artillery launches to the base of the tower,’ Uvalliat continued. ‘That is where the enemy forces are likely to be most concentrated.’

Stevang frowned. The silence outside the command centre had been reassuring. Now it bothered him. ‘They should be there already,’ he said. ‘We know how little anything we’ve thrown at them has slowed them. They should have arrived.’

‘Why do you think they haven’t?’ said Belltav.

‘Why aren’t we hearing demolitions charges? Why aren’t we hearing their efforts to reach us?’ By now, he should have heard the muffled noise of futility, the drumbeats of the enemy troops signing their death warrant by wasting energy in a position from which they could not fight back when the shells came for them. Instead, there was nothing.

His worry was contagious. The candle flame of triumph, so fragile and precious, went out.

‘Where are they?’ he said.

Restavan turned on the operators at their stations. ‘Why aren’t you scanning?’ he demanded, even though Stevang knew they were doing so, constantly. ‘Show us the lenses!’

A screen above the hololithic table displayed a succession of images captured by the only surveillance lenses still active in Protarkos. Most of them were inside the command centre, its ventilation system, and the two sharply twisting corridors, so narrow there was barely room for one person to squeeze through, that provided an emergency way in and out.

Even though he knew the operators were performing their tasks well, because their survival was on the line too, and even though he knew that Restavan’s demand was pointless, Stevang watched the images with his breath held, terrified he’d see the enemy there. But that would have been impossible. The invaders could not teleport themselves through over a hundred metres of solid rockcrete. Surely not?

The shafts and the escape hall were empty. Stevang breathed again, but he was no less anxious.

‘So where are they?’ Uvalliat asked, as worried as Stevang was now. ‘If they aren’t trying to blast through, then what are they doing?’

Stevang grunted, struck by unwelcome realisation. ‘Outside,’ he said. His voice rasped. ‘They’re outside.’

‘We have no lenses working there,’ said Uvalliat.

‘Except the ones on the turrets.’ Stevang looked up at the stations that controlled the turrets. The operators’ screens showed only the empty sky as the turrets rotated back and forth, scanning for targets. ‘Turn the guns in as far as they can go,’ he ordered. ‘All of them. Make them look along the wall.’

The operators obeyed. The views changed. A different series of lens captures appeared on the main tactical screen. The views were frustratingly fragmentary, the perspectives challenging as the guns swung to the limits of their targeting arcs.

‘There!’ Uvalliat shouted. She grabbed the shoulder of the operator closest to her. ‘Go back.’

The operator obeyed, and the enemy soldiers came into view. There were ten of them, climbing the outside of the wall, making their way up to the top of the command centre’s bunker.

‘So few?’ said Uvalliat. ‘Where are all the others?’

The blood drained from Stevang’s face as he thought of how much thinner the shield of rockcrete was above his head. ‘It doesn’t matter!’ he shouted, even though it did, it very much did, but all he could think of was the danger he saw now, and that was the danger that had to be fought. ‘Shoot them! Shoot them off the wall. All turrets, fire! *Fire!*’

They were halfway to the top, Tersus estimated. The squad was spread out, keeping at least twenty metres apart to avoid making a concentrated target. Above, below and to the sides, the defence guns rotated back and forth, oblivious. The legionaries climbed quickly. The rockcrete was pitted and crumbling through long exposure to the toxic air. It was a simple matter to punch and kick hand- and footholds. A single blow from ceramite fists or boots was enough to break away a piece of masonry and create a small ledge to grip. The wind blew hard against Tersus. It tried to prise him from the wall. It shrieked as if it wanted to toss him high and far, and drop him hundreds of metres down to the base of the hive. It was too weak. His power armour gave him too great a mass for the wind to move.

Then the turrets turned their guns at the wall.

‘They’re looking for us,’ Tersus warned the squad. ‘They’re going to see us. Be ready.’ He moved faster, taking greater risks. There would be no safety now. He jumped, and at the top of his leap, he punched the wall and hung on. Then he leapt again, diagonally. He did this twice before the turrets opened up.

A storm of shells slammed into the wall. They came in at such sharp angles that they were almost skimming the surface. The trajectories were awkward, but it didn’t matter. The shells still hit. Explosions rocked the wall. Rockcrete disintegrated, transformed into violent dust storms. Chunks of the wall collapsed and tumbled down in avalanches.

A shell burst a few metres above Tersus’ head. He flattened himself against the wall, holding fast as rubble pounded down. Dust enveloped him. He could see nothing. That meant he was invisible too, and he didn’t have to see to jump. He leapt straight up and then again, and then he was out of the dust cloud.

On his right, chance turned perverse, and a shell caught Arkus in mid-jump. It blew the legionary apart. Arkus’ rune in Tersus’ auto-senses blinked red and then vanished. A moment later, so did those for Levan and Bussek.

‘*I think they mean to do us harm*,’ Garro voxed.

‘Are you sure?’ Tersus answered in kind, spitting mordant humour at the helpless sensation of being an insect on the wall. There was no one to fight. There could be no retaliation. All they could do was keep moving.

So Tersus moved like an insect. He tried to make his jumps into an unpredictable scuttling, movement without a pattern that would avoid the killing blow. He moved into dust clouds where he could. They were a kind of cover, brief and weak.

He came out of one cloud, and a sudden violent gust of wind blew the air around the wall clear for a few moments. Cannon fire came at Tersus from multiple directions, a stitching of destruction zeroing in. Shrapnel rang against his helm as a shell exploded nearby. He hurled himself up into the aftermath of the blast. He grabbed the lip of the shell crater at the same time that a chunk of rubble struck his right shoulder. He held tight, and then pushed himself up again. There was dust everywhere now. It was a blessing, but it was only there because the explosions were so close. The wall shook with the blasts. It shook as if it were going to crack wide open. It shook as if

it wanted him off and dead.

He was close to the top, but the barrage made it seem far away. The wall was eternal, and gods were hammering it to pieces around him. The rattling booms of the turrets destroyed all other sound. Communication with his battle-brothers was impossible.

They know what to do.

The task was simple. Climb. Climb. Climb. And in the end, become the death of the Order.

Another rune winked out. Then another. Toravas and Xevok were gone.

The shells kept coming. They would not stop until Tersus and his brothers were dead, or until he silenced them.

He jumped and held, jumped and held, moving back and forth and up, always up, through the storm of sound and dust. He would climb alone if he had to. Or if he died, one of the others would reach the top, because at least one of them had to. That was all it would take. Just one.

Just one.

Tosarrat was inside the tank again, and the shouting coming to him over the handset from Protarkos was panicked.

'Can you get them?' Stevang shouted. *'Can you get them? I think they're still climbing. The turrets aren't enough.'*

'We can't aim for anything at that distance,' said Tosarrat. 'Not with any accuracy, and we might destroy you.' It would take heavy artillery cannons to strike that high. Tosarrat was about to start bombarding the base of the tower, where the enemy was expected to be, but that was far enough down from the command centre's reinforced position inside the bunker that the risk was manageable.

'Then finish the rest of them now,' Stevang said. *'Wherever they are, in the name of Order, finish them!'*

'We shall,' Tosarrat promised. He killed the connection. 'Are we in range?' he asked the tank commander.

'We are, High Comptroller.'

Tosarrat raised the handset again and addressed every unit of heavy armour under his command. 'Begin the bombardment. Fire at will.'

He climbed back up to the hatch to see the destruction.

Row upon row of tanks and self-propelled artillery guns roared. Thousands

of cannons fired at once. A cluster of shells arced towards the base of the central tower. The rest of the barrage slammed into the lower walls and spires of the hive. Plumes of smoke and debris rose, and buildings fell. The north-west face of Protarkos began to crumble.

At the base of the wall, surging out from the smoke, came organised movement, moving quickly towards the army's line of advance.

'They're here!' Tosarrat shouted, forgetting for a moment that no one could hear him. He dropped down the hatch and snatched the handset from the operator. 'The enemy is here!' he yelled. 'They're down here. All guns, aim for the base of the wall!' And then he was back up outside, staring through his goggles to see the effect of his order.

The line of the invaders was wide and thin. There were at most ten thousand soldiers, he thought. He felt anxious, and he felt eager. That small number had taken Protarkos. They were formidable. But they were in the open now, outnumbered more than a hundred to one, and facing tanks. Their strength and their skill hardly mattered any more.

The guns of the leading tanks came down, and they fired the first salvo. Shells exploded along the line of the enemy. They were still more than a kilometre away. Tosarrat could just make out the shattered silhouettes of bodies hurled into the air. He leant forward, excited, tasting victory. His goggles were filthy. It was so tempting to take them off and see.

Something flashed in the air above him, bright and sharp. The concussion came a moment later, muffled, almost modest, and somehow ominous. Other flashes appeared further down the line to both sides of him. Tosarrat frowned, puzzled. There was no effect that he could see.

Then he was throwing up, violently, painfully, suddenly. The vomit filled his respirator and he inhaled it back in. Choking, and vomiting again, he clawed the hood off his enviro-suit. He collapsed over the turret, vertigo and pain bursting in his head. He took a deep breath of poisoned air, and choked again.

The tank veered off course. Its engine screamed, and the vehicle weaved drunkenly, crushing prostrate, dying infantry. It shook Tosarrat like a rag doll. He was barely conscious of the movement. His head was burning. His eyes were burning. His lungs and his gut were burning too. He clutched at his forehead, and his skin sloughed away, sticking to his gloves.

He tried to scream, but his body was already past that frontier.

Before his eyes melted from his skull, he glimpsed another tank careening his way. He was dead before the collision.

The rad bombs went off over the Order's front line. The launched munitions burst, and the invisible killer did its work. As Mortarion led the charge into the poisoned wastes, the effect of the rad weapons was immediate. Drivers died at their controls. Guns went silent. Tanks slewed to a stop or careened out of control. The armoured columns were tight, and the collisions were immediate. Tangled masses of metal blocked the path to those coming up from behind, and the radiation was not done.

'Keep up the launches,' Mortarion ordered. 'Scorch the earth.'

For the first stage of the assault, the ten thousand legionaries were spread out as far as possible. They formed a single rank, wide enough to confront the massed formation of the Order, and to lure the enemy forward with the illusion of a foolish, brittle line of attack. The enemy's barrage was taking its toll, but the distance between each legionary was such that no single explosion could do more than kill a single warrior. Anything less than a direct hit was not enough to stop the advance of one of the Death Guard.

And from the advance came a steady launch of rad and chem munitions. The XIV Legion turned the land ahead of them into a strip of poison, unseen in the toxic air, but infinitely more lethal than Galaspar's atmosphere. There was no protection in an enviro-suit or inside the hull of a tank.

The tanks slowed, died and crashed. The infantry died as they caught up with the armour. Their bodies liquefied and turned to muck under the treads of the tanks. The forward movement of the Order's army slowed, while the Death Guard kept going at a steady, inexorable pace. The line was a scythe blade, coming to slice through the enemy.

Phosphex spread its green fire. One bomb after another went off, creating a long, unbroken, liquid cloud. Tanks burned, and the flames reached inside to find the screaming flesh. Soldiers broke and fled, and the agony followed, an all-devouring beast.

The Order's advance stopped completely. The front line was blackened and still. Toxic fumes rose from where the phosphex had passed, and the radiation would linger for much longer. It was death for any mortal to enter that zone.

An early victory, Mortarion thought. It was also one that meant little. The army was in range of the hive, and its arrival had forced the confrontation with the Death Guard. It wasn't a war the Death Guard could win without the support of the fleet. What he had to do was keep the Order from realising that for as long as possible.

'Longer arcs,' he voxed. 'Kill them from behind and in front.'

He hurled more phosphex bombs, sending them hundreds of metres to the rear, and then rushed forward. At the edges of his vision, he saw his Legion follow his example. They attacked as a single blade.

Mortarion ran through the zone of death and into the next ranks of the enemy. They had pulled back slightly, and their guns were lowered. They fired a hail of shells straight ahead. A gun swivelled in Mortarion's direction. It was slow. He was fast. He leapt up over it, landed on the top of the turret, and slammed *Silence* into the barrel of the gun. The scythe cut through the metal, and Mortarion jumped again, to the side of the tank, coming down in the midst of the infantry. Panicked by the spreading death on both sides of them, then jolted by the apparition that landed among their ranks, they screamed and fired wildly. Mortarion swept *Silence* in a wide arc. Heads fell like rain. Then he sprinted to the next tank over, and gouged its cannon too as it tried to swing his way. He was onto the next vehicles behind by the time the two tanks fired. The shells exploded in the damaged barrels, and the blast lifted off the turrets.

Screams and flame surrounded Mortarion. He was death, and he was sweeping his curse through the enemy. He was the front point of a wave of destruction, and in his wake, his legionaries brought more of the same. Death spread wide and far over the Order. Hundreds of soldiers died with every passing second. More tanks collided, more exploded. Destruction reigned.

'You are my unbroken blades!' Mortarion voxed to his sons. 'Our losses make us stronger, for the enemy sees our indomitable advance and knows we cannot be stopped. You are one with me, my sons, and I with you.'

He flew from vehicle to vehicle, disabling each with a quick strike and moving on before the effect of his attack was felt or known. He stayed high and visible to his legionaries, that they could see in him the same blade. 'The blade that is best forged cuts deepest!' Mortarion shouted. 'This is our furnace! This is our making!'

Born of Terra or of Barbarus, the legionaries responded to his call. They knew themselves, regardless of their home planet, to be *his* sons. His saw them strike with a fluid, deadly unity, and their great scythe tore deep wounds into the foe.

When Mortarion reached an area his phosphex bombs had devastated, he paused amidst the corpses and stilled machinery to hurl more bombs ahead.

He ate further and further into the army. For entire minutes after the initial bombardment, the Order was helpless, the cannons all but silent as rank after rank died before any counter-attack against the Death Guard could be taken.

Entire minutes. Mortarion took satisfaction in knowing that for the soldiers of the Order, those minutes were an age, a time of death that would never end. For him, the minutes were too brief. He knew the Death Guard's surge would end. It would last only as long as the shock of the Legion's initial attack.

The size of the Order's army would tip the balance. Sooner rather than later, much further back in the ranks, in the regions of the plain far beyond the reach of the chem and rad munitions, one or more generals would know what had to be done. It would only take one.

The minutes ended as Mortarion knew they would. The end began with a monstrous booming of guns. Hundreds upon hundreds fired at once, and the thunder of the reports went on so long, it was a continuous roar.

'Fight on!' Mortarion commanded in the seconds before the result of that thunder came. 'The enemy's anger cannot stop us. There is no defiance that can stop the coming of death!'

He fought on, cursing what was about to happen.

After the thunder came the screaming, the colossal screams of shells beyond counting. A rain of black, which became a sea of fire. The barrage had no end, and it had no target save the front. It was utterly indiscriminate. The Order destroyed its own tanks and troops in order to strike at the Death Guard. The front line of the struggle became a cauldron. The ground erupted around Mortarion. There was no shelter to be had, and he did not seek it. He ran on, leaving the annihilation of the foe to the foe itself.

Now, in the full boil of the cauldron, came the second phase of his attack. 'To me!' he voxed to the Legion. 'We form the circle of death!' He stopped running forward, and moved now in a spiral, *Silence* sweeping wide, tearing

asunder the hulls and cannons of tanks that tried to advance on him even in the midst of the shelling. The Death Guard closed in on his location, individual legionaries arrowing through the ranks of the enemy armour. As they gathered around Mortarion, they pushed back out again, their growing circle forcing the enemy back as if they were the besiegers instead of the besieged.

The barrage from the rearward ranks of the Order became pointless, falling on terrain where there was nothing except their own vehicles struggling to manoeuvre through craters, and those guns fell silent for the moment. The forward tanks adapted, though not without still further losses, to the new configuration of the Death Guard. The legionaries gathered, and the tanks surrounded them. Gradually, the balance of power began to shift again, the massive numbers of the Order taking their toll. The circle of the Death Guard could no longer push outward. The armour pressed in, grouping the legionaries into a single zone, a clear target for bombardment at both short and long range once more.

Mortarion had anticipated the possibility. So large a force against one so small made encirclement an inevitability. And so, on the journey to the Galaspar System, he had prepared his warriors for this moment. He had shown his officers how they would change the rules of the battle and turn the encirclement against the foe. ‘The fist has closed around us,’ he now voxed. ‘Punish the fist. Spear it through the flesh.’

The Death Guard struck, lines of warriors radiating out of the circle like the spike proteins of a virus. The spikes drove between the tanks in lightning runs, tearing through the Order’s infantry as though it were not even present. The spikes were a hundred warriors long, and when they were deep inside the enemy ranks, they turned to left and right, engaging the armour at close quarters, ripping it apart before it had a chance to adapt again. Disarray spread outwards through the Order. Mortarion gained more time, as more than a thousand tanks were turned into flaming wreckage in the space of minutes.

But there were thousands more, and the Death Guard attack could not spread chaos all the way through the ranks. The commanders further back took the decision to cauterise the wound, and they began a new bombardment, this time set on the total annihilation of the region infected by the Death Guard. They turned two square kilometres into an unbroken

blast zone.

A shell came down close enough to hurl Mortarion off his feet. He flew through the air and came down in the burning wreckage of a tank. He fought his way to standing and tore himself free of the tangle of metal. More explosions buffeted him, but he pushed on, seeing nothing but flame and geysers of earth around him. Hundreds of legionaries were already gone, and there was no halt to the shelling. The Order was going to destroy as much of its own army as it took to finish off the Death Guard.

And this will finish us.

Mocking his efforts, the deeper booms of the planetary guns went on and on, keeping the fleet away.

All was thunder, all was flame. There was no escape. The only ends would be in death, or in the silence of the greater thunder.

Give me the silence, Tersus. Give me the silence.

Garro saw the shells hit the wall just below Tersus as he pulled himself up again and the explosion lifted him high, through another cloud of dust. His arc took him up and away from the wall, and then he fell, coming down in the midst of a concentrated blast. When the smoke cleared for a moment, there was no sign of the battle-captain.

Garro and Deros were the only ones left on the wall. All the other identification runes had gone dark.

Garro had served with Tersus for years. He could not conceive of the Seventh Great Company without the captain’s leadership. There was also no time for grief or despair. The success of the campaign now came down to two legionaries, and there was no alternative but to climb through the shelling.

Garro launched himself up, the roof in sight through the smoke and fire. He drove himself faster and higher, ignoring the blasts. They could not be avoided. They would kill him or not.

They will not. For Tersus and for Mortarion, I will finish this.

An explosion just below him nearly peeled him away from the wall, but he held tight against the heat and the concussion. Then, with another heave, he reached the roof. He ran to the centre, whipping out a melta charge. By the time he had set it, Deros had joined him.

The turrets were still firing, but there was nothing left for them to target. In

the plains to the north-west, the tanks of the Order were unleashing a continuous barrage. Smoke covered the land. He wondered how many of his battle-brothers lay dead beneath that smoke.

The melta charge went off, eating through the roof, opening a wide hole as the rockcrete liquefied and evaporated. Garro already had the other charge ready. He had the augur readings of the signal cluster position memorised.

‘One more and the centre will be ours,’ he said. He jumped down into the hole, planted the bomb and climbed back up a short distance, out of the way of the heat. Deros clung to his position in the crude shaft a few metres above, bolter at the ready.

This time, when the hissing of the melting ended, light shot from the bottom of the shaft. Garro and Deros dropped. They smashed a hololithic table with the impact of their landing.

The humans that surrounded them were frozen, terrified.

One of them, clearly their leader, said, ‘Order is all.’ He spoke the words as if they were a question, as if a sentence that had been the credo of his entire life had suddenly been revealed as a lie.

Mortarion’s orders were clear. Garro seized the Lord Comptroller. The man wilted in his grip. ‘The Reaper of Men has come for Galaspar,’ he said. ‘And he has come for you. You will stand before him, and Death shall judge you.’

The silence came. The monstrous heartbeat that pounded beneath the endless thunder of the tanks stopped. In the midst of the cauldron of explosions, Mortarion felt the silence as the absence of a greater vibration. He knew what it was, though. It was the silence of victory. Though the tanks still fought, the cannons that held back the fleet were still.

Mortarion called to his Legion, to whoever was still alive and fighting. ‘The planetary defences are down. We have won. Your brothers are coming. The death of the Order is at hand.’

Each of the legionaries had fought alone in the turmoil of the tank bombardment. Mortarion knew they still lived only through the senses in his armour. Many had died. Thousands still marched with him. That was enough.

The maelstrom of the bombardment shattered time. It caught Mortarion in an unchanging present. Survival was measured by the beats of luck, not of

seconds, or of hours. He did not know how much time passed in the world outside the zone of annihilation. He knew that victory was coming, and all that mattered was for his legionaries to last through the violent timeless limbo.

He ran faster, scythe upraised, chasing the start of time, because when it began again, when the Death Guard had survived the tanks, then he would be the true bringer of death once more. He hurtled through another geyser of rock, and when he came out the other side, he could see more tanks ahead. He was on the other side of the bombardment. He had moved faster than the commanders of the Order had thought to make it spread. He charged at the lines of tanks and enviro-suited soldiers before him. For the moment, he was alone, a single warrior challenging millions, and the millions quailed before him.

And then the heavens roared.

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ELEVEN

Mortarion had not witnessed a bombardment by a Legion fleet from the ground before. For the soldiers upon whom it fell, it must, he thought, have seemed the work of angry gods, and the unmaking of Galaspar. All the artillery barrages and the booming of the planetary defences were as nothing in comparison.

Judgement fell from the skies. Shells thirty metres long screamed down through the air and struck with seismic power. It was as if a chain of volcanoes were suddenly giving cry throughout the plain. Huge craters overlapped each other, and within them was only the faintest trace of what had been destroyed. Fireballs rose high into the air, and left mushroom clouds of smoke in their wake. The thunder was greater than anything that had come before. It was the sound of a world cracking open.

The Order's tanks stopped firing the moment the fleet's anger fell on them. Soldiers and vehicles tried to flee, but who could flee the skies?

As the plain erupted, Mortarion's legionaries re-formed the line on either side of him. The battle had taken its toll. Half of the ten thousand had died in the cauldron. But as the other half took up their formation again, they were a grey wall of grim inevitability. They were death, and they could not

be stopped.

‘Galaspar falls in the manner you said it would, Lord Mortarion,’ Typhon voxed.

‘Yes,’ Mortarion said. ‘We have taken Galaspar. Some portions of the Order may not realise it yet, but they have lost. Our work is far from over, though. Until it is done, the liberation of the people of Galaspar will not be complete.’ He would not leave this planet until he knew that he had truly climbed its peak and slain the last Overlord.

The earth trembled with the force of the attack. The land outside the zone of the bombardment split open with a spider’s web of crevasses. Where the shells were falling, there was nothing to see except one ferocious sunrise after another. Between the Death Guard and the region of absolute annihilation was a narrow strip of ground. On it was what remained of the Order’s army. There was still strength there, in materials and in numbers. There was not in spirit. The will to fight was gone. The cataclysm overwhelmed the war-chems fuelling the soldiers, and they howled before the sight of the bombardment. They curled on the ground, screaming for the nightmare to end. Tanks and infantry fell inside the spreading crevasses. Panic swept through the ranks, and there were more collisions as tanks tried to flee in opposing directions. The thin line of the Death Guard in front of the Order’s army created as much terror as the devastation falling from the skies to the rear. The two were one. Two weapons wielded by the same hand.

The thunder ended at last, and the smoke began to clear over a plain of glass and craters. The soldiers that remained thought they saw a way to escape, and the retreat began.

‘Do not let them flee,’ Mortarion voxed to the Death Guard. ‘Leave none alive.’

The line of warriors moved forward as one, the long blade of the scythe passing through its foe once more, and they marched over the Order. The legionaries raked the retreating lines of the enemy with bolter fire, and launched chem munitions ahead. Infantry and armour ran straight into the horror of rad bombs and phosphex.

And then, after the rain of shells from the sky, there came a rain of iron. Black teardrops came down on the plain of glass. They were drop pods in the thousands.

For the Order, there could be no retreat.

From the command centre of Peitharchia, the battlefield was far beyond the horizon, but the pulsing, savage light from the orbital bombardment lit the sky for hundreds of kilometres. The sound of the destruction reached the centre as an unbroken noise, deep and white.

‘We have to surrender,’ said Schyalla Vecchiaz, the Comptroller of Labour.

‘Do not speak treason,’ Acting High Comptroller Deron Fallsein snapped. His voice broke and went high.

‘*Treason?*’ Vecchiaz sputtered. ‘Don’t speak nonsense! How can you think we have any choice but to surrender?’

‘We will fight to the last war unit,’ said Fallsein.

‘We already have! The armies are gone! The armies of Peitharchia, Kathestos, Dikasia, Entolar, Akamptos… All of them! They’re gone!’

‘There are still other cities.’ Fallsein looked around at the other comptrollers for support. They were silent.

‘The other cities are too far to help us,’ said Vecchiaz. She spoke calmly, trying to get through to Fallsein, trying to get him to stop clutching at straws and admit the reality of Galaspar’s situation before it was too late. ‘It will take many days, at the very least, for the first of their forces to reach us. They will be too late, and what do you think will happen to them? The planetary defences are down. The enemy’s fleet is here. Look at the screens!’ Her frustration made her shout again. Fallsein’s expression was stubborn with fear. ‘Look at them! Look at what is coming down!’

Fallsein blinked at the screens. He didn’t seem to be able to process what he was seeing. ‘What are they?’

‘Landing craft! And tanks, twice the size of ours. The invaders are sending a great army to Galaspar. One small contingent took Protarkos. Now they will be ten times as strong. We have to surrender before we’re destroyed. If we sue for peace now, maybe we’ll have a chance to keep some of what is ours. They will need our expertise to run the planet.’

‘No,’ said Fallsein.

‘*No?* Comptroller Fallsein, we have had an uprising in the lower levels.’

‘It was small, and it has been crushed.’

‘But it happened! There will be more.’

The other comptrollers still said nothing. They clustered at the far end of

the hololithic table, away from Vecchiaz and Fallsein. *Cowards*, Vecchiaz thought. They had decided to sit out the conflict, avoid making a decision, and wait to see who won.

‘We will not give up our freedom on Galaspar,’ said Fallsein. ‘With High Comptroller Tosarrat dead, I am Acting High Comptroller, and I am the final authority in Peitharchia. There will be no surrender.’

Vecchiaz grabbed him by the collar and slammed his head against the table, hard enough to crack the surface. Before he could recover, she put her hands around his throat and squeezed. His face turned purple. He beat against her arms, but he was stunned, and she was strong. After an eternity, Fallsein went limp, and his gurgling stopped. Vecchiaz held his throat closed for another minute. When she was certain he was dead, she released the body and backed away from the table. Fallsein hit the floor with a leaden thump.

Vecchiaz took a deep breath, trying to slow her pulse. ‘Comptroller Fallsein has failed to act in the interests of the Order and of Galaspar,’ she said. ‘I have relieved him of his command, and assume authority in his place. Is that understood?’

The other comptrollers murmured their assent.

‘Good.’ She turned to one of the technicians. ‘Do we still have communication with the other cities?’

‘Yes, Acting High Comptroller Vecchiaz.’

‘I will speak to them. And prepare a broadcast on all channels. We must reach the invaders somehow. We must tell them the war is over.’

On the devastated plain beyond Protarkos, the grand mustering took place. After the drop pods, the Stormbirds landed, and the Spartan assault tanks, and the full panoply of the XIV Legion’s grey death. Mortarion stood with Typhon on a rise formed by mounds of tank wreckage and stone. He surveyed his forces growing larger and larger in the midst of a colossal cemetery of vehicles and troops.

‘I see a certain irony at this moment,’ Typhon said.

‘You have decided to speak freely, Calas, as you always did on Barbarus. What irony is that?’

‘The mustering of the grand army after the war is won.’

‘The war is won,’ Mortarion agreed. ‘That doesn’t mean the war is over. It

is not. We did not come here just to defeat the Order. We came to destroy it. The work before us needs to be more systematic. Now we require numbers more than speed.’

He was going to expand further, but a vox from Garro interrupted him.

‘Lord primarch, we are receiving a vox-request from the Order to speak with you. The representative is Acting High Comptroller Schyalla Vecchiaz of Peitharchia.’

‘I will speak with her,’ Mortarion said. ‘She will understand what has come for the Order.’

‘Great lord,’ Vecchiaz began when she came on, *‘I am speaking not for myself, but for all of Galaspar.’*

Mortarion cut her off. ‘You mean you speak for the Order,’ he said.

The pause was only a brief one. *‘Yes,’* she said, clearly knowing her position was not a good one. What she did not know was how bad it really was. *‘I speak for the High Comptrollers of the other great cities of Galaspar. They are listening in on this channel.’*

‘The comptrollers of all the cities?’ Mortarion asked. Her answer didn’t matter, but he was curious.

‘Not all,’ Vecchiaz said after another short pause.

Some portions of the Order were still defiant, then. That was completely irrational. For a moment, Mortarion thought about the villagers on Barbarus, the ones who, before he had come to help them, fought back against the Overlords, in spite of the futility of doing so. He dismissed the comparison. The defiant ones here were tyrants, not survivors.

‘This is your chance to speak,’ he said to Vecchiaz. ‘Use it well.’

‘What are your terms?’ Vecchiaz asked.

‘There are none.’

Another pause, a confused one this time. *‘I don’t understand.’*

‘I spoke clearly,’ said Mortarion. ‘I will repeat myself. There are no terms.’

‘But we wish to surrender.’

‘You can’t.’

‘But we no longer wish to fight you.’

‘That was never your choice. I came to destroy you. What you do in response to that is up to you. It is no concern of mine.’

General Kavol Verrinang of Entolar had spent his life appreciating fear. He cultivated it. He had learned early on how to use it to enforce the rules of the Order, and to get what he wanted. His parents had taught him by instruction and by example. He had been big as a child, and was big as an adult. It was as a child that size had mattered more, when he was up against other children of similar rank and privilege. What he discovered in those early years was that the ability to provoke fear was a gift. It gave him the edge among his peers. If they feared him, they deferred to him.

As an adult, and as a general of inherited rank in the army of Entolar, he fought for the Order with an unmatched ferocity. There was a challenge, which he intuited quickly, and that many others in the elite failed to properly appreciate. The challenge was that the Order's control of the Galaspar Cluster was so absolute, there was no true enemy. There was no threat to the Order's domination. If there was no enemy, how could he fight? He fought by being a more fanatical enforcer of the commandments of the Order than anyone else. And he made his fanaticism and his skill crucial through the application of fear.

No city of Galaspar had ever faced an uprising of the labour units. The chems that kept them docile were too effective, and their energy was too carefully monitored. The labour units were provided with enough food to give them the strength to work, but only just barely. There would never be any real danger of an uprising. The reversal of Galaspar's rotation was just as likely. But Verrinang saw how the fear of a rebellion could be stoked. If the labour units were being repressed, he said, it was for a good reason. There were so many millions of them. The dregs of Entolar outnumbered the elite by hundreds of thousands to one.

Articulating the bare numbers was enough to cause anxiety. Asking the right questions did the rest. What if the chems failed? What if the labour units developed a resistance to the chems? What if they only pretended to take them? What if? What if?

It didn't matter if the questions had no foundation in reality. The questions worked. The elite of Entolar were afraid, and they turned to the man who had frightened them for solutions. He provided them. He repressed the labour units with greater savagery. It was important that he be seen to be doing so. His spectacles of rage and merciless punishment made him more frightening, and more indispensable.

Though he was not one of the High Comptrollers of the city, he was invited to their councils for his wisdom. What he said very often became policy. His dream had been to spread his particular version of fear, the one that specifically made *him* the answer to the terror of an imagined uprising, to the other cities. It hadn't happened. He hadn't been able yet to find a way to raise his status beyond Entolar.

Perhaps, he had thought as he left Entolar with his army and began the march to Protarkos, the reason he had not risen even higher was that he had never thought to exploit the fear of an invasion. That wasn't just something he hadn't believed could happen – it was something he hadn't even imagined, just like he didn't imagine day failing to break.

And yet invaders came. And the news from Protarkos had been disturbing. The mobilisation, though, had been exciting. This was a true fight, a chance truly to be a general commanding vast forces against a dangerous foe. At the same time, the Order would be going in with such overwhelming numbers that not only was victory a foregone conclusion, but the armies of Galaspar would also teach the enemy fear before crushing them.

Entolar was the furthest of the cities from Protarkos to have sent its forces. Verrinang had compelled the infantry to march fast, and faster yet. He was desperate to catch up, worried that the war might be finished before he could take part. He left thousands of soldiers behind, dead from exhaustion. That was for the best. Since they died, they were inferior units, not worth using. He made good time, and though his army was the furthest to the rear, he caught up, and he was there in the plains around Protarkos to take part in the great bombardment.

Verrinang rode in the turret hatch of a tank at the very rear of his lines. He was not at the rear because of any nervousness about leading from the front. He would have wanted that to be understood. He was at the rear rather than the front because he wanted to see his army stretched out before him. That was the only reason. It was. He let High Comptroller Raphiat be on the front lines. He was, after all, nominally the final authority over the city's army. He was also ornamental, and always deferred to Verrinang.

Because he was at the rear, Verrinang saw the full spectacle of every tank firing. He exulted in the power of the Order, and rejoiced that he had lived to see this day.

Then came the horror from the skies, and an end to all rejoicing. He

screamed with everyone else when the shelling began. He could not understand what was happening. The destruction was so total, it was beyond human ability. The Order was dying, and that couldn’t be. The shelling from the skies was a nightmare, but no matter how much he screamed, he could not wake up.

Fear had never been something that he had experienced. Now, he thought he would die from the terror. When the sky and the land had turned to fire, he ordered an immediate retreat. He screamed the order, with tears of horror running down his face and smearing the inside of his enviro-suit goggles.

He was lucky that he was at the back of his columns. He was not lucky enough to be safe, but lucky that he did not die right away in one of the vision-filling fireballs. The edge of a massive blast wave caught the tank and sent it flying. It hurled him from his perch, and he landed on his back, a dozen metres from where he’d been, staring up at a sky being torn asunder.

He was hurt, but still breathing, and his enviro-suit was intact. He got up and started running. Other survivors nearby, perhaps a score of them, ran with him. He was still the general in their eyes. They believed he would know what to do.

He didn’t. He would have given away his rank and its power to anyone to be told what he needed to do to stay alive. There was no one, and so he ran, chasing a mirage of salvation, fleeing the reality of doom.

He headed north-east for hours. The land became more broken, riven by gullies and cracked and jagged ridges. There was better concealment here. He kept looking back, at the contrails of landings beyond counting. Pods descended in cataracts, and they were followed by swarms of ships. Verrinang was glad he could not see the army that was growing. He was glad to be spared that kind of awe.

What he did see was signs of the invaders spreading their reach and sparing no one. Gunships fanned out over the north and east, and the sounds of battle never stopped completely. Isolated booms and the hard chattering of powerful guns sounded in the distance. Verrinang heard them to left and right, beyond his limited horizon. Sometimes even ahead, and that made him change the direction of where he ran.

‘Who is still fighting?’ one of the soldiers asked. He was an officer, head clear of chems and able to speak.

‘No one,’ said Verrinang. Who could even think of standing against that

power? Who could do anything except run, and run, and run? ‘The enemy is hunting us down.’

He kept going, with no clear thought other than putting as much distance as possible between himself and the all-powerful invaders. One of the chem-juiced soldiers tore his enviro-suit while scrambling through a patch of sharp rubble. He breathed in the air of Galaspar and was dead in a few minutes. Verrinang knelt by the corpse and took the soldier’s canisters of oxygen to add to his own supply.

When night came, he and the other terrified soldiers sheltered in a gully, pressing themselves close to the rock walls. A small stream, so polluted it was corrosive slime, trickled sluggishly by. It was far from full dark. The sky was bright red with reflected fire.

‘Where are we headed, general?’ the officer asked.

‘To Entolar,’ Verrinang said, ‘for reinforcements.’

That was a lie. There was no new army to be gathered. The only force still in the city were the enforcers who kept the labour units at work and terrified.

The truth was that Verrinang didn’t know where he was going. He was heading in the direction of Entolar through instinct, and the need to make for what was known and familiar. He had no plan, no hope of what he might do if he did reach the city. All he wanted to do was run and hide.

Gunships roared by overhead, lights stabbing at the land, bleaching it white. Verrinang and the soldiers didn’t move. They stayed frozen and silent after the gunships had passed, the snarl of their engines diminishing in the distance.

We are beneath notice, Verrinang thought. *There aren’t enough of us to trouble with. We are no threat. We’re safe. We’re safe.*

He started to shake, and then he heard the sounds of heavy boots on stone, marching in his direction.

Keeping flat against the rock, Verrinang crawled to the top of the gully and peeked over the edge. A squad of the invaders was heading straight for him. They were not searching. They knew where they were going. There was awful purpose in their stride.

They couldn’t be human. They were too tall, too terrible. Their frowning helms were their true faces, and they terrified Verrinang. In the crimson night, their bleak grey armour seemed tinged with blood.

He scrambled back down the gully and sprinted down its length, following the toxic stream. The soldiers followed him, and he cursed them for the noise they were making. After a hundred metres, the gully became too narrow, and he had to climb back up to the level of the plain.

He hadn't gained any ground. The invaders were almost upon him. Moaning in fear, he ran on. When he looked back, the enemy was even closer. Their strides were so much longer than his.

He could not win this race.

He faced the terrors and fell to his knees. The other soldiers did the same. He raised his hands in prayer. 'Mercy,' he begged. 'Please, have mercy.'

His answer was the flash of muzzles.

In the command centre of Peitharchia, Vecchiaz was trying hard not to panic. She didn't want to panic because there was nowhere for her to run, and if she was going to have any chance at all of surviving, she had to keep her head.

Why won't they let us surrender?

There's no answer to that. So stop asking the question. It's not doing you any good.

The screens in the centre showed the slaughter underway in the hive. The invaders had breached the walls at multiple points. They blasted open the defences on the ground level, and armoured transports were rumbling into the main thoroughfares of the city. Gunships dropped more troops on the levels midway up and near the top of the agglomeration of towers. Automated defences were useless. There was hardly anyone left to fight the enemy, as if fighting would have made any difference. The towering warriors moved through the halls and manufactoria of Peitharchia like machines. They massacred any overseers they found, and left the labour units untouched.

'What do we do? What do we do?' Taven Crassian, High Comptroller of Finance for Peitharchia, was much closer to losing his struggle with panic.

'We welcome them,' said Vecchiaz. She couldn't think of anything else.

'But they won't accept our surrender.'

'What else can we do? We can't fight. We can't run.' All they had left was total, enthusiastic compliance. 'We'll show them the truth of the Order. We'll show them we can be useful to them.'

‘We can be!’ Crassian clutched the straw in a death grip. ‘We can be very useful!’

‘Open the doors,’ Vecchiaz ordered, and one of the officers at the control stations obeyed. ‘We’ll present no opposition,’ she said. ‘There will be no need to kill us.’ She took up a position in front of the doors, looking down the corridor leading to the command centre. At the far end were the doors to the grav-lift.

The sounds of gunfire drew closer. The hive thrummed with the sounds of violent death.

She heard the hum of the lift now. She stared at the doors, bracing herself for the terror she would feel when they opened.

‘They’re almost here,’ she said.

Crassian moaned.

The lift doors parted, and five giants in death-grey armour marched down the hall towards the command centre. Their guns were raised.

Vecchiaz bowed and spread her arms as they arrived at the entrance to the centre. ‘You are welcome in Peitharchia,’ she said.

Muzzle flashes were her answer too.

Digger and Scrape hid with the others in the dormitory, cowering in the dark while the world shook and howled. They didn’t know what was happening, but surely the gods were destroying Galaspar. There was nothing to do but wait for the end.

And then, after an eternity of thunder, there was silence. The quiet was almost as frightening as the thunder, and for some time yet no one dared pull open the doors and venture out of the refuge. Finally, hunger and thirst drove them and their fellow labour units out into the halls.

All was dark, except for where flames burned, sometimes brightly where gas pipes had burst. Scrape knew the halls well. After one of the other labour units had done her best to bind Digger’s wounds, Scrape helped her limp her way through pitch-
dark and flickering gloom. A few levels down, they arrived at a food manufactorum. The machinery was stilled, but the vats of grey, unfinished food were open. The crowd fell on the sludge. There was enough for everyone. It was the first time Digger could ever remember having eaten her fill. She could barely taste anything through the pain that wracked her

body. The pain kept her active, though. She did not know if she would live much longer, but she was determined to see the end of the war, and the end of the Order.

Without shifts, Digger found it impossible to keep track of time. After arriving at the manufactorum, perhaps a day later, maybe just several hours, someone managed to start some secondary generators, and there was a bit more light.

It was enough light to see the return of the gods.

The gods brought more generators with them, and with still more light, it was possible to travel across entire sections of Protarkos. The manufactoria worked again to produce food, though the chem processes were disabled.

There was light that came from outside too, where the roofs and walls of the city had been shattered by the anger of the gods. Those regions were too poisonous to venture into, but Digger held her breath and went near them a few times, just close enough to see a glimpse of light of a kind so rare it was mythical.

The gods moved through Protarkos, rounding up the remnants of the Order. They announced the captures, and paraded the former masters through the halls, dragging them off to the great cavern created by the invaders' ship. Digger and Scrape were scavenging when they saw a procession go by. Digger knew who the prisoners were. They were the High Comptrollers. Even the Lord Comptroller was there, in chains. She had seen their faces displayed on propaganda screens in the manufactoria every day for as long as she could remember. Lord Stevang's features were the Order made flesh. He was the ruler of Galaspar. He would always be the ruler of Galaspar. The sight of him as a prisoner astounded her, even though everything had changed.

She and Scrape followed, and joined the huge crowd of labour units that had gathered in the cavern.

The air here wasn't good. It seeped in from outside, and it hurt her lungs, though the rubble that had collapsed around the ship acted as enough of a seal to keep the atmosphere breathable.

Tens of thousands of the labour units had gathered, perching on every surface in the cavern, their attention focused on the front of the ship. Death stood there, halfway up the ramp. Below him, before the base of the ramp, a line of his warriors stood guard over the imprisoned masters.

Heads down, the masters were on their knees in front of the labour units.

‘They’re kneeling to us,’ Scrape whispered, awed. ‘They’re *kneeling* to *us!*’

Digger nodded vigorously.

Death began to speak. His voice filled the cavern. Digger heard it echo in the halls, and she knew that everyone in Protarkos was hearing him. Was his voice in the other cities too? It had to be. He was speaking to all of Galaspar. She was sure of it.

She looked up at the figure of Death, and his terrible stillness and majesty filled her with a solemn terror. He was more than Death. He was the true master of Galaspar. He was Death and he was lord. He was the Pale King.

‘You are free,’ the Pale King intoned. ‘The Order is no more. It can never return. These wretches before you are the last of your rulers in this hive. Now see their end.’

Death’s warriors raised scythes, and slashed them down. It was as if it were all a single stroke, and the heads of the masters rolled on the ground. The bodies fell, necks gushing blood.

Digger gasped. She was horrified, frightened and exhilarated. She stared at the head of Lord Stevang, his face frozen in his last terror.

One of the High Comptrollers had been spared. It was Lord Restavan, the Comptroller for Manufactoria, the man whose image had stared down from their screens onto the misery of the labour units.

‘In all the other hives of Galaspar,’ the Pale King continued, ‘this is the fate of the Order. Not one of your former masters will be left alive.’ He paused. ‘Our task here is done,’ he said. The cavern was utterly silent, except for the faint hiss of gases released from his rebreather.

‘Your task is beginning,’ he said, and nodded.

The warrior who held Restavan released him. The comptroller bolted from the captors, his face convulsing in desperation. The gods let him run. He did not look where he went. He simply ran, leaping and stumbling over rubble. His path took him in a straight line towards Digger.

A gift. A gift from the Pale King.

The strength of conversion, of fanaticism, surged through her burned frame. She seized a piece of rockcrete with her remaining hand, and she reared up in front of Restavan. He jerked to a halt, startled. Digger swung the chunk of rubble at him. The pointed end crashed into his skull. Blood

splashed in her face, and Restavan slumped to his knees. Scrape jumped on him, and so did others.

They tore him apart.

Still holding the stone, still standing, Digger gazed reverently at the Pale King.

‘Others will come,’ he announced. ‘They will bring you fully into compliance with the Imperium of Man. I give you a final command. Tally the dead of the Order. They numbered you. Now you number them. Find all their dead. Count them all. Know the measure of your enslavement. Know the measure of your freedom.’

He turned, then, and walked into his ship. His warriors followed, leaving the corpses of the Order where they lay.

The ramp rose behind them, and the huge doors of the ship ground shut, coming together with a clang of finality that shook the cavern. Klaxons blared, a deafening howl, and Digger fled with the other labour units. She was one of the last. She looked back down the corridor as she ran, and saw the first of the flames bursting from the ship’s engines. Then the vibrations brought the roof of the cavern down, and she was limping on in darkness and dust.

The gods had departed.

Later, as they sat against a wall, thinking of what they had seen, Scrape asked, ‘Is he gone?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Digger said. ‘He knows what we do. He knows everything. The Pale King will be watching us.’

As she trembled, all she could think of was to begin the count.

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TWELVE

The primarchs moved onto the roof of the command tower's bunker. The level was not quite even. The entire hive had a lean now. The wind blew hard against the primarchs. Poisonous fog eddied in tatters around them, and flowed into the hole Garro had punched through the roof. Evening was coming, and the light was shifting away from brown to a deeper grey. The vista of destruction on the plain did not soften in the gloom. From this height, the shadows of ruin blended into the suggestion of a graveyard.

A Storm Eagle hovered at the south end of the roof, its side doors open.

'We've seen enough,' said Sanguinius. 'We could spend years going through the archives of this campaign. But I think we've learned what we came to learn.'

'Is it time for me to receive my judgement, then?' Mortarion asked. He stared at the Angel in challenge.

'We are not here to clap you in irons.'

Mortarion looked at the Angel with narrowed eyes. 'That is no answer. That is craven evasion. I hear sentencing in your voice and your words, *brother.*' He moved to the edge of the roof, then turned around to face his judges. 'No, you are not my gaolers. You *are* my judges. But know this. *I*

am *yours.* Your hypocrisy is naked before me. Do we understand one another?'

'I think we do,' said Sanguinius.

'I have one last question,' said Horus. 'I still wonder about the complete purge of the Order. There might have been practical value in keeping some of the mid-level functionaries alive. Or don't you agree?'

'I do not,' Mortarion said, emphatic. 'Every member of the Order left alive would be a piece of its structure preserved. Even the smallest fragments of that structure would have been more poisonous than this air. I did not destroy the Order to then permit the possibility that it might take shape again in some way.'

Horus looked like he was about to say something else, but he kept his peace.

'It's the tally that concerns me,' said Sanguinius.

'There are millions to work on it,' Mortarion told him. 'They will complete the task. It is no impossible thing.'

Sanguinius glanced at Horus, who nodded, looking pained. 'Are we agreed, Sanguinius?' he asked. 'Are there more questions, or can we say, truly, that we understand?'

'We can,' said Sanguinius.

'Very well,' said Horus, his face set and grim. He stepped forward. 'We came to understand. Like we said. And now we do.'

'I wonder if you do,' said Mortarion.

'No. That is *our* question. Do *you* understand what you have done here?'

'I do. I understood it from the moment I undertook this task. The Galaspar you find is the result that I foresaw. It is the correct one.'

'That you intended this does not mean you see fully,' said Horus. 'It's true that the cost to the Imperium and the Galaspar Cluster of a blockade and then a long siege would have been much greater.'

'Even you agree with this, Sanguinius?' Mortarion asked.

'I do,' said the Angel.

'Does that surprise you?' said Horus.

'It does.'

'Then you do not see all. And there is something that it is terribly important you be able to see.' There was something in Horus' eyes of the sorrow that had been in their father's.

‘And that is?’ Mortarion asked, wary.

‘The other cost.’

‘To whom?’

‘To the population of Galaspar.’

Mortarion grunted in disbelief. ‘They are liberated.’

‘Physically, they are,’ said Horus. ‘In other respects, they are not. They are traumatised. They have seen death in person sweep through their world. They do not know what freedom is. How could they? Where would they have encountered it? The force that oppressed them was destroyed by a greater one. All they know is destruction.’ Horus paused. He faced the hill of the dead. ‘And then there is this tally. They are doing it because it was a command. That’s the only meaning they see in it – the meaning of obedience, not the point of the tally itself. I don’t know what will happen to them when they are done, and there are no further commands. Do you see?’ Horus sounded like he was pleading. ‘Liberation is not just the destruction of the oppressor. We can’t replace one tyranny with another.’

Horus paused, and his last sentence struck Mortarion like a poisoned dagger. He felt its effect spread through his veins, cold with a truth too large and awful to grasp fully in the instant.

‘This is what our father wants you to see, Mortarion,’ Horus went on. ‘He wants you to understand the need for nuance in the crusade. You cannot always be the scythe. Look down below, brother. Look at the hills of bodies. You can see them even from this height.’

Mortarion looked back and down, at the distant ground and the mounds of the dead. On them, the people he had freed were moving like maggots on carrion, counting and counting. Was that liberation?

We can’t replace one tyranny with another.

The sentence kept echoing in his mind. It set up resonances he did not want to hear. He forced himself to listen to the one Horus wanted him to hear. And maybe Horus was right. Maybe his father’s sorrow was right.

The look in those eyes…

Had there been something other than sorrow in them? Had there been the hope that Mortarion would find a destiny richer than the one his first father had bequeathed him?

He shook off the thought and the weakness that came with it. He faced Horus again. ‘I see the people of Galaspar,’ he said. ‘I see what I have done.

I would do it again. I have ended the tyranny that enchained them. The tally of the dead is the task of a people who must see and know that their former masters are truly dead. And the cost? Everything has a cost. What do you think would have happened if we had accepted the cost of a blockade and siege?' He snorted. 'Would the liberty of these people be a sylvan paradise? Perhaps the likes of Roboute would believe in such a vision, but I am no such fool.'

'You are if you imagine yourself unique in your experience of a lethal home world,' said Sanguinius. 'As you are, too, if you think the manner of your conquest has no impact beyond the end itself. You came to Galaspar as the Angel of Death, Mortarion, not as a liberator. That is the core of the matter.'

If the Angel was aware of any irony in his words, he gave no sign of it. 'Does that displease you, Sanguinius?' Mortarion asked. 'Perhaps it does not. Perhaps it is useful to use me to burnish your own self-image.'

'You broadcast the execution of the Lord Comptroller to billions,' said Sanguinius. 'You brought death to this world, and began what you call its moment of liberation with death.'

'And yet the Eighth Legion spreads terror by any means it can. It has broadcast its share of executions. I have not seen them on trial.'

'Enough!' Horus shouted. 'Enough,' he said again, more quietly, and with true sorrow. 'It is all far beyond enough. We have seen enough. We know enough. Mortarion, you have done enough.' Horus lowered his head for a moment, then looked up, regretful yet determined. 'Our father seeks the compliance of all inhabited worlds with the goals and the dream of the Imperium. There is compliance here, but not with that dream. Instead, there is a wasteland and a population consumed by their fear of the Imperium, of the embodiment of death.

'Hear me, Mortarion. The conquest of Galaspar will be forever marked as a tragedy of the Great Crusade. It will never be celebrated. It will be the work of generations for the Imperium to undo what you have done here. You are censured, Mortarion, and your first command will be commemorated by mourning.'

Mortarion said nothing. He was calm in his anger. It felt cold as a tomb. *I foresaw this too*.

'Farewell, Mortarion,' said Sanguinius. 'I take my leave of you. Though I

doubt you will believe me, I feel no pleasure in this judgement, or in the accomplishment of this task. My hope is that when next we meet, you will agree that our decision this day was the just one.'

The Angel boarded the Storm Eagle. Horus lingered a moment longer. 'Please learn from this, Mortarion. Learn that there is another path for you.'

Mortarion stared back at his brother, waiting him out, and at last Horus broke with his gaze and joined Sanguinius aboard the gunship. It roared away, climbing quickly.

Mortarion stayed where he was, alone with the sepulchral anger.

The wind gusted. Poison rippled in the grey of evening. Mortarion gazed down at the landscape, on the endless expanse of craters and wreckage. All was ruin, but ruin was still better than the Order. There was a purity to ruin.

Something scuttled behind him. He turned to see two of the people he had liberated, two of the former labour units of the Order. A man and a woman. They were both caked in grime. The man supported the woman, half of whose body was a mass of burn scars. Her right arm was a blackened stump; her right leg was withered and infected, and would soon have to be amputated. She had received some treatment. The end of her arm was encased in a permanent cast, and layers of tattered bandages hung from her leg. The degenerative progress of her wounds had been slowed, but not stopped. The injuries were clearly the work of phosphex. She was one of those rare survivors, those cursed with having been just far enough away from the phosphex that it did not kill them and end their misery.

Mortarion heard Sanguinius' accusing voice in his mind. *This is your handiwork.*

They stopped several metres away, the man clearly too frightened to come any closer. The woman let go of him. 'You can go, Scrape,' she said, her voice slurred. Only the left side of her mouth had any movement. The man backed off, bowing to Mortarion, and then fled. The woman staggered forward a few steps more, and then fell to her knees. She lowered her forehead to the rockcrete of the roof. 'My lord,' she said. 'You have returned. Will you receive my tally?'

'Your tally,' Mortarion repeated.

'I have completed my allotted share. I counted every day, and I kept the hope that you would return, that I might prove to you that I am faithful to your lesson.'

‘You may present your tally,’ Mortarion said. *Would that you could see this, Sanguinius. The tally has meaning for her. What would you say to her? Would you dismiss her for not sharing your horror?*

She spoke, her good eye weeping with gratitude. The number was high, impressive for one with her wounds.

‘You have done well,’ said Mortarion. He was interested to feel gratitude towards this wretched survivor. She was the proof that he had been right.

There is another path for you. Horus’ words troubled him. This woman, so desperate to give Mortarion the tribute of her labour, showed the words were wrong, didn’t she?

The woman reached out, as if she would clutch the end of his cloak, but pulled her claw of a hand back, not daring to be so presumptuous.

‘My lord…’ she said.

‘Is there something that you wish?’ Mortarion asked.

‘Take me with you, my lord,’ she said. ‘Accept me into your service.’ She looked up, the good eye shining. ‘Let all who see me learn your precepts.’

Mortarion looked down at her, and gratitude swelled with pride. *That so small and weak a mortal should be the justification of my acts…*

She would be my apostle and teach my precepts. Why should she not? They hold true for more than just my sons.

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘The Order gave me a number.’

‘That number is gone. I will not hear it. You gave me your tally, and that is the only number on Galaspar that matters, because it marks the end of what came before.’

She took a heavy, ragged breath. ‘Others call me Digger.’

‘Do you choose to bear that name?’

She shook her head. ‘It is not worthy of the service I seek.’

‘It is not,’ said Mortarion. ‘You, however, are. And so, I shall name you Cinis, and I accept your service.’

Cinis wept with gratitude, and managed to rise up with her one good leg. Her body was a ruin, yet she was free of the shackles of the Order.

Here is your answer, Sanguinius. Here is my vindication, Horus.

The wind blew harder, and its howl was one of triumph. The landscape of Galaspar was not a tragedy. It was victory.

It is the grandeur of ruin.

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EPILOGUE

A year later

Where the sorcerous world of Absyrtus had been, there was only the void now. The purity of darkness, the absence that was death. Mortarion lingered before the primary viewing shield. The darkness before the *Fourth Horseman* was a balm. He had acted well. He had acted with finality. This was another task completed. Absyrtus had vanished, and so had his doubts about his path.

‘You said this marks the end of a debate, my lord,’ said Cinis. ‘Is it one you will rejoin?’

Familiar anger wafted through Mortarion’s soul on the breath of a grave. ‘No,’ he said. He spoke softly, but the coldness of his voice made Cinis take half a step back. ‘I have nothing more to say to my brothers on the matter. I know their error. They will know of my resolve through my actions. They will know the Death Guard’s truth through our Legion’s deeds.’

‘They were wrong to try to change your ways,’ said Cinis.

‘Our ways.’

‘Yes, my lord. From your words to all who serve you. Our ways.’

‘My brothers were wrong in their censure, and I was wrong to have let the

weakness of their sentiment cloud my judgement,’ said Mortarion. *Their sentiment, and their perverse censure.* ‘Absyrtus was a needed correction. It showed the error of moderation. The blade must never be restrained.’ He spoke the next sentence like a vow. ‘We shall always be the scythe.’

It was clearly what Cinis needed to hear. She bowed her thanks and withdrew.

We shall always be the scythe.

It was a promise to himself, too. He would never deviate. The attempt to do so had been a mistake. Mortarion was fortunate he had made the attempt to temper himself on Absyrtus, a world where he was able to see the error in time. It felt like fate had guided him here.

Perhaps we are drawn to the campaigns that require us. Maybe there were worlds where Vulkan’s concerns were the correct ones. Where Sanguinius’ nobility was needed.

Not the worlds that fall in my path. He thought of the words he had spoken to the newly unified Death Guard. *Doom shall stalk a thousand worlds.*

It would. Fate decreed it.

Or his father. The campaigns of the Great Crusade, his included, were determined by the Emperor’s plan.

Was Galaspar?

The sorrow in his father’s eyes. The lesson Horus had tried to teach Mortarion on their father’s behalf.

The path it seemed his father had hoped he would follow.

His father could be mistaken.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of the Warhammer Horror novels *The House of Night and Chain* and *The Deacon of Wounds*, as well as the novella *The Faith and the Flesh*, which features in the portmanteau *The Wicked and the Damned*. His work for the Horus Heresy series includes the novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Ephrael Stern: The Heretic Saint, Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, and several stories involving the Grey Knights, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *A Dynasty of Monsters* and the Neferata titles *Mortarch of Blood* and *The Dominion of Bones*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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An extract from *Sigismund: The Eternal Crusader*.

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The storm wind breathed across the Ionus Plateau. Summer heat and dry winds had pulled the dust up into the air so that now a layer of cloud lurked on the horizon, flickering with lightning, bruise-dark smudged with ochre. The plain had once been an ocean, or so the story ran. The waters had long since drained away, leaving dust where there had been a seabed and mesas of stone that had been mountains beneath the waves. The tombs of long-dead kings stared down from those mountains at the drift camps at their feet. They were called camps even by those who had been born in them. They were home to the millions that the great war for and against Unity had pushed from the cities and hives to the north and south. Alleys tangled through walls made from scrap and fabric. Smoke rose from cooking fires, along with the cries of the dying and the songs of the living. On and on it went, rolling beyond sight to meet the edge of the world.

This was the land taken by the lost. Even for the despots who hungered for dominion, it was a shunned place. The monarchs who had bored their palaces and tombs into the mountains had left their mark on the land in the form of stories of enchanter kings and tales of ghost voices laughing from the mouths of deserted palaces. It had been an empty place for millennia, but then new armies had marched across the world: gene-wrought armies in skins of metal. Cities became pyres as warlords new and old tried to make new realms or hold on to what they had. Refugees had come to Ionus, first a few and then tens of thousands. They had made homes and had children, and done what humanity does even as the world is falling into fire – they had survived. Now the wars were supposed to be over. From many warlords there had come one who called Himself ‘Emperor’, and He had proclaimed the tattered realms He had conquered not many lands but one. One

Imperium.

For the people in the drift camps of Ionus, this new Unity had been neither a blight nor a triumph. As with all the other wars in all the other years, the new peace was a distant irrelevance. Life remained as it had been, balanced on sharp edges, unsoftened in its cruelty. The stories of the old kings of the mountains had become the founding myths of murder gangs that ran the alleys at night with sharp knives and crowns of blades. Spring winds sometimes brought poison from the north. Those of autumn, the smell of the dead left on the mountain slopes for the carrion birds. In winter, ice clotted the gathered dew, and in summer Sol breathed furnace heat and summoned thirst to steal the spit from people's mouths. There was no change, nor hope, just the certainty of struggle.

Sigismund could taste the storm on his teeth like he was biting copper. He was breathing hard as he twisted down an alley between two shacks. Behind him the cries rose, ululating up into the storm wind. They were close.

He reached the dead end of the alley and looked behind him in time to see a figure come around the corner at a run: wiry muscle and scarred skin dusted with white ash, a mask and crown of jagged metal, bones and skin hung on cords. The blade in the figure's hand was a hooked smile of plasteel. It was a Corpse King, one of the gangs that hunted and harvested in this part of the drift.

Sigismund jumped up, grabbed on to the edge of the roof, and hauled himself up. He started running, boards shaking under his strides. Ahead of him, a metal pylon jabbed up from the roof into the darkening sky. The storm was a dark wall, curving up from the land into the heavens. Behind him, the Corpse King vaulted up the side of the alley and landed in a crouch. In the distance, the storm spoke. Thunder growled through the air. Lightning sparked in its depths. It was an angry god of a storm.

Sigismund's eyes caught on a lightning flash, and his stride stuttered. There had been something there in the clouds, glinting in the flare of energy. Another flash, and there it was again, and not just one but several, glinting motes in the roiling murk…

'Come down to the kingdom!' shouted his Corpse King. 'The dead want you!' The ganger was closing, almost on him. Sigismund kicked his run into a sprint. A second Corpse King climbed onto the roof. She had knives in her hands and finger bones in her hair.

Sigismund reached the pylon and ducked behind it. For a second, he was out of sight of the gangers. He picked out the metal bar he had left propped against the pylon. The first Corpse King came into view at full sprint. The metal bar hit him in the throat, just under the mask. Sigismund slammed the tip of the metal bar into the youth's chest, and then swung it up into his face. The crude mask mashed into skin and bone, and the ganger was falling, bone fetishes clattering, blood and air gasping from between broken teeth. Sigismund could hear the second Corpse King running across the roof. The one on the floor pushed up, hooked blade in hand. Sigismund slammed the metal bar down once, hard, and brought it up just in time to meet the second murder ganger as she came around the side of the pylon. A blade flashed out towards Sigismund. It was hooked, a polished sliver of scrap, the hilt wound in green-blue plastek and human hair. The cut was fast, but Sigismund was already swinging the metal bar and the Corpse King did not have time to duck back before it crashed into her upper arm. She staggered, crying out, arm dangling. The ganger's other knife sliced out. He darted back. She was up and coming for him, cursing, stabbing and slashing.

Sigismund had heard from one of the other orphans that there was supposed to be an art to fighting, that warriors in the distant wars knew ways of using blades and guns, and hands and feet to kill and survive. He did not know if that was true, but here, in the drift camps, the only art was being the one left alive.

A blade point slashed across his left forearm. A sharp feeling and then a sudden soft lightness in his legs and gut as the shock slammed through him. Nausea followed in a flood. The knives flashed forwards again. Sigismund swung the bar into the masked face. The Corpse King crumpled, blood dribbling from behind the mask.

Sigismund could feel his hands shaking. There were more running feet pounding the roof. Cries rose. He needed to move. There were many of them, at least twenty, maybe more. Too many. They had come hunting again as though roused by the coming storm. Too many to face all at once. He had learnt that since the first time he had fought. In that first fight, he had got the best of it somehow, sent some down bloody into the dust. The rest had run, the cost suddenly higher than they wanted to pay for the skin of a few orphans. Since then the gangs had come for them repeatedly: the Queens of

Hades with their manes of cadaver hair; the Blood Spectres in crude armour dipped in red paint; the Breath Stealers, gasping out strings of rattling noise from tongueless mouths. Most were youths little older than Sigismund; with every winter there seemed to be more, and they always came back. He had learnt: you did not face them together, you faced them one at a time.

He ran to the edge of the roof, jumped, hit the dust, crouched, rolled, and came up running again. Blood was dripping down his left arm, the weight of the metal bar dragging at the right. His chest felt like it was going to explode. He ducked down a half-collapsed opening between two shacks. Running footsteps shook the roof panels above and behind him.

‘Come back, little one!’

Keep going, he needed to keep going. He reached the end of the alley. The space beyond was a wide oblong open to the sky. A charge reservoir sat in the middle of the oil-stained ground. A web of cables stretched from the machinery up to a soar of electro-kites in the sky above. Sparks were already running down the cords. Sigismund ran towards a narrow gap between the charge reservoir and a shack wall. He reached it just as he heard the first of the Corpse Kings reach the opposite roof edge. He did not look around as they dropped down and ran after him. He slowed, just enough. One of the Corpse Kings was just a few strides behind him, a spiked club held in two hands. There was a niche in the wall, made by the poor join between two sheets of rusted metal.

‘You’re ours now!’ the ganger snarled.

Sigismund ducked into the niche in the shack wall, pivoted, and brought the metal bar around. It hit the Corpse King in the gut and folded him in two. Sigismund’s knee met the masked face as it came down. He was not as strong as the ganger, but the falling weight of the Corpse King’s head, and the rising knee, were enough to mash the mask into the face with a crack of bone.

Thunder roared in the ochre-and-iron sky. A tongue of lightning struck one of the electro-kites. The flash of light exploded in Sigismund’s sight. He staggered. The bar dropped from his hand. He could not see. The world was white dancing with neon ghosts. There were cries close by, the sound of someone barrelling towards him. He jumped back almost too late. A sharp point scored across the meat of his left shoulder. The pain jolted through him.

‘The gods of death are coming!’ called a voice from close to him. ‘They have come to choose! They have come to make us live forever!’

He saw something move behind the blur filling his eyes. He lashed a foot out, felt it connect, heard a grunt. He punched his open right hand in the direction of the sound, felt it hit something that felt like hair and the strap of a harness. He grabbed and yanked. The weight of a human body crashed into him. Arms flailed at him. He yanked again and heard the Corpse King slam into the metal of the charge reservoir next to them. He brought his knee up, felt it hit something soft, and then hit again and again, hearing the Corpse King gasping for air. There were shouts in the narrow space, more blurred images moving in the clearing fog. He landed one more knee, then shoved the body away from him and broke into a run. Lightning split the sky above. Thunder rolled, obliterating the sound of cries and feet behind him. He reached a shack wall, found a door and hauled it open.

The space inside was as empty as when he had scouted this route: lengths of rag folded and stacked in a corner, cooking pots made from cast-off munition casings, lumps of blast glass threaded on strings so that they caught the flashes of lightning from the open door. It was a home. Where the people had gone, he did not know; there were more ways to vanish in the drift than there were to live. He slammed the door closed and dropped the bar he had prepared across it. He turned, half stumbling, looking down at his left arm. Clotted blood and dust covered it down to the fingers. He picked up another metal bar he had left waiting and staggered across the shack as something heavy hit the door he had just shut. There was white fog at the edge of his sight. That one on the roof had caught him well, a deeper cut. He was slowing down. He could not slow down. He just needed to keep moving, keep them focused on him.

He pulled up the length of board he had loosened in the shack wall. All the details he had prepared – the route he had run, when he had turned to fight, the bar to close the door, the backup weapons he had left himself – all of it was so that he could face the murder gangers one at a time, on his terms. The gangs that had come the last few times had given up with only a few of their kind lying bloody on the dust, but not tonight. Perhaps it was the storm, perhaps the Corpse Kings had decided to do whatever it took to run him and the others down. No matter the reason, they were not stopping.

He had ducked out of the shack just as the door he had barred gave way.

He started to run. The white fog was spreading from the side of his sight. Above him, the storm clouds boiled with lightning. The ground dropped into a slope. He half ran, half tumbled down it. Behind him, the cries of the Corpse Kings rose and vanished in the drumming of the rain and roll of the thunder. He twisted to look back, saw one on the rooftops, then two, then three, more, more than he had ever seen on a hunt. This was not going to go like it had before.

Bright light surrounded him suddenly, pouring from the sky. He ducked and looked up. A shape turned in the air above him. He had seen flying machines before. Sometimes they slid across the sky above, trailing white from their wings. Sometimes they flew lower, and you could hear them chewing the air as they moved. Some looked like grey darts, and others like they were made by people who had heard of birds but never seen one. They were always distant, things of another world that did not touch the dust. This one was closer than he had ever seen before. Rain poured from its block-sided body and wings. Cones of blue-white fire breathed from its flanks. The sound of it shook his flesh down to the bone. He could smell the burning-fuel reek of it over the rain. Gun mounts twitched on its wing tips and snout. Its skin was dark in the storm light. The light shining from its belly held on Sigismund for a second and then flashed up to the rooftops, where the Corpse Kings turned their heads up and howled.

Sigismund did not wait: he turned and began to run, feet sliding in the dust as it became mud. Above, the flying machine shifted across the sky, the beam of its light panning across the shack roofs. Sigismund reached an alley and ducked in as he heard the Corpse Kings' cries change in pitch. They were coming and he needed to reach the only family he had ever known before they did.

Four blows of thunder shook the sky as he reached the rock. A thumb of old stone, it jutted up from the sea of roofs. A fissure split its side, barely wide enough for a person to crawl into. There, in the cool dark, there was just enough space for a dozen people to lie or crouch, more if they were small. Faces looked up at Sigismund as he squeezed down the gap. Some were young, others had the years, but hunger or cruelty had kept flesh from their bones.

'Get the light out,' he said.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Yel, rising to her feet, the blade-tipped pole in her hands.

‘The Corpse Kings are coming,’ he replied. ‘A lot of them. We have to move and move now.’

‘Slowly now,’ said Yel, calmly. Her eyes were steady. Sigismund was suddenly aware that he was shaking. Pain and exhaustion and fear were juddering through him, like power through a charge coil that was about to blow. Yel looked at him, not blinking, waiting, steady. The eyes of the smaller ones in the cave were on them, wide in the light of the flame that rose from a rag lamp. He could feel their tension, the tense instincts that had kept them alive this long in a place that ate the alone and the lost. They were all looking at him and Yel and Coroban, the eldest three, all waiting. He forced his breath to slow and stilled the instincts that were screaming at him to shout and run.

‘You’re bleeding,’ said Coroban, moving up beside them, jerking his head at Sigismund’s left arm.

‘One of them snagged me,’ he said.

‘I should have gone with you,’ said Coroban.

‘You’re not fast enough,’ said Sigismund.

‘Neither were you,’ said Coroban. Sigismund almost smiled. Coroban was bigger than him, just as tall, but thicker in limb. He had come out of one of the techno-domains to the south and still had the remains of shackle-plugs in his spine and skull. Whatever had happened to him, he had got out alone, and made it to Ionus. Not fast, but strong. He had broken the skulls of three gangs who decided they wanted the meat off his bones, but he was too slow for the running fight that Sigismund fought. They had agreed on that after they had both nearly died. So, Sigismund led the hunters in a dance and the others held the line, the best chance of survival if he failed. It had worked, too. Until now.

‘Is the route north open?’ asked Yel.

Sigismund shook his head, blinked. A hammer beat of pain and nausea was rolling inside his skull.

‘I don’t know. There are flying machines, too. They came with the storm.’

‘Flying machines?’

‘Hovering low. Tracing the ground with lights, like they are watching. They had guns.’

‘The war’s come,’ said Coroban.

‘We go west,’ said Yel.

‘That’s towards the mountains,’ said Sigismund. They all knew what he meant. The mountain tombs and ruined palaces were the haunts of the gangs. If they went towards them…

‘There will be fewer of them,’ said Yel. ‘If they are hunting then they won’t be watching their own patch. And if the war has come then I’d rather take my chances in the ghost caves than down here.’

Sigismund did not answer.

‘You know I am right,’ said Yel after a moment.

He looked around, at the eyes fixed on them.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Siv. The boy was new. They had found him walking on his own on one of the dust paths to the south. He had been clutching a piece of parchment that he refused to let go of, and neither he nor any of the others could read. No tears then, and none now, just a stillness that came from expecting nothing that was here now to be there in the next moment. Sigismund knew the look. It was his own.

‘You are going somewhere safer than here,’ he said, holding Siv’s gaze, before looking back at Yel and Coroban.

‘You will have to go now,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how close they are or how long I can distract them.’

He began to move towards the way out.

‘Come with us,’ said Coroban, and he put his hand on Sigismund’s shoulder to stop him. ‘They will kill you.’

Sigismund looked around at Coroban and then at Yel and back at the other orphans of the drift, still listening, still watching. He thought of Thera, the eldest of the orphans when he was small. In his memory, he saw her touching her forehead to the piece of metal she called a weapon and going out to face the killers in their ragged crowns. She had stood up and never come back, but he and others had lived.

‘I stay,’ he said.

Coroban shook his head, but Sigismund was already working his way back up the gap in the rock, pulling the metal bar with him in his good hand.

He found his first Corpse King barely two hundred paces from the bolthole in the rock. The ganger was moving across an open patch of ground that

was becoming a swamp, his head turning. He did not see Sigismund until he was just an arm's reach away. The Corpse King flinched back, but the metal bar crashed into his shoulder, and then his legs. He fell. Spray showered up from the boards of the shack roof. Sigismund looked down at him. The ganger was writhing, trying to move with broken bones. Sigismund stood above him, looked up. In the distance he could see the light of one of the flying machines. Then lightning whipped across the belly of the clouds, turning the world blinding silver. The rain was pouring down him. Drops exploded in the sea of mud at his feet.

'I am here!' he shouted as the thunder roar faded. 'If your dead kings want me, then come and get me!' The ganger at his feet screamed – maybe a warning, maybe a cry of pain.

Sigismund saw a masked figure come to the edge of the roof next to the open ground. Another joined it and then another, and then a crowd of them were vaulting and swinging down. They did not come at him but spread out in a ragged crescent, wary.

Sigismund watched them. The blood in his veins was beating a roll of thunder that filled his ears. He could taste metal and bile. He tried to push the sensation down even as he felt it reach through his nerves to shake his fingers on the metal bar in his grip.

The crowd of Corpse Kings watched. The rain poured down them, pulling the white dust from their skin. Masks and crowns glinted in the flash of lightning. Some of them held knives, others switched their grips on hooked blades and spiked clubs.

'The lords of death watch us, little one,' called a taller figure who stepped from the half-circle. Teeth glinted on cords around his neck. A mask of blue plastek and battered metal covered his face. His chest was bare and gaunt, but muscle moved under the taut skin. He held a club capped with a ball of black metal in a crude echo of the statues of the dead monarchs that filled the tombs in the mountains. This was a leader. Sigismund could tell that from the way the others pulled back and waited, listening. 'There are angels watching from the storm. They have come to pick those who will live forever. Your blood and bone will pay my crossing into the land of ghosts.'

Sigismund did not reply but raised the metal bar, fighting to hold it steady as he touched it against his forehead. He closed his eyes for a moment. He thought of Yel, and Coroban, and Siv, and the others running towards

whatever safety they could find.

‘Look at you,’ called the Corpse King. ‘You have hurt a lot of us, but we cannot die. We rule death, and you are ours now, little one.’ The leader took a slow step forwards, the club resting on his shoulder, a long blade loose at his side. ‘We will find your friends, too. We know they have run. We will find them. A few might like to take a crown from us, eh? Live as kings…’

A flash of lightning, and the Corpse King lashed forwards. The club whirled. Sigismund just managed to jump out of reach of the swing. The tall leader half stumbled on his comrade still lying in the mud where Sigismund had planted him. Sigismund brought his metal bar up above his head and swept it down. The leader ducked back and swung his blade in a hacking arc that whistled through the air. The crowd were a blur of smeared crowns and masks beyond the rain.

The Corpse King stepped back to swing. Sigismund rammed the tip of the bar forwards. It was not a strong blow, but it was fast, and it punched into the leader’s mask. Blue plastek shattered. The ganger staggered. Sigismund wrenched the bar back and hammered it down. The leader tried to get his arm up, but the bar whistled as it crashed into the side of his head. The crude crown broke, and the ganger was falling, blood scattering into the mud and falling rain.

Sigismund almost fell as the weight of the blow pulled him over. In his ears he could hear a high ringing. The crescent of Corpse Kings seemed still, frozen as the moment fell from past to future. Sigismund felt the breath sucking into his lungs. The moment pooled, gathering in the exploded second of raindrops hitting the ground.

The Corpse Kings charged. Howls tore from their lips. Sigismund swung just in time to meet a ganger with a copper mask. Then another was on him and he swung again, half blind. He hit nothing, but the figures in masks jumped back and he had an instant to swing the bar up over his head. They surged in. He whipped the bar around in a circle. The tip caught one on the side of the head and they went down, dropping like a broken doll. He whirled, using the bar’s weight in place of strength, and slammed it into another. Bones broke, and a crowned figure was falling, screaming.

He might have stood a chance. He was fast and knew how to use his weight. He had lived through fights like this before. But there were more of them than there had been then. Many more. And these false kings of cruelty

would not run when they started to bleed. They believed that gods or angels of the dead were watching to claim them. They would not stop. No matter how many of them he sent down to the mud. He was going to end, hacked down, and beaten to bloody meat.

Pain exploded in his left leg, and he was falling. One of the Corpse Kings had got behind him and swung a club into his knee. He felt a scream batter at his lips as he bit them shut. The Corpse Kings howled and surged in. The one who had taken his leg out pulled his club back to swing it into his head.

Somebody came out of the rain and cannoned into the Corpse King, felling the ganger. The figure had hold of the club it had wrenched from the ganger's hand and brought it up and down in a crushing arc. Lightning flashed and Sigismund saw Coroban whirl the club of the youth he had just killed and slam it into the centre of the next nearest mask. The Corpse Kings recoiled, shocked. Sigismund could feel pain and weakness dragging at him like dead hands pulling him down into the mud.

'Why?' gasped Sigismund.

'Came to find you,' said Coroban. 'Could not let you do this alone.'

Sigismund rammed his bar into the ground and forced himself up beside his friend as the Corpse Kings charged. A blade scored a red line across Coroban's shoulder. Sigismund braced himself against the bigger youth's back and swung his weapon into the face of the nearest ganger. Coroban hit again and again, and two more went down. The masked faces were circling now. They wanted the kill, wanted the bones of these orphans who had stood against them. All they needed to do was wait and let exhaustion do its work. It was always that way with cruelty, Sigismund knew – it did not have to sacrifice, or struggle; it had only to be patient.

'You should have…' began Sigismund, fighting for breath. 'You should have stayed with the others.'

'No,' was all Coroban said. Sigismund noticed a ripple in the circle of gangers, as muscles tensed. 'You have stood for us alone enough times.'

A ganger with a pair of serrated knives leapt forwards.

Thunder and light filled the air.

The Corpse King came apart.

Sigismund's eyes clamped shut as a hot blast wave slammed into him. He stumbled. His sight was shattered neon, his head ringing. He pushed up. Coroban was shouting something. The Corpse Kings were running and

there was something lying in the mud, blown-open ribs and bits of meat, and now he could hear Coroban shouting, and knew that his friend was terrified. He was shouting in the half techno-tongue of his birth, calling for help, for protection, for whatever neglected gods or spirits of his birth to hear him now.

Death was walking towards them through the rain. It was the grey of storm clouds, clad in curved plates. Two eyes burned red in a face like the ram on a land train. It was huge, too huge. The rainwater exploded from its shoulders. A sword sat at its waist and a gun sat in its right hand. Its movement shook with smooth power, each step a threat. The image of it hammered into Sigismund's eyes and mind, filling them, crushing everything that was not an almost overwhelming instinct to run. It closed with them, unhurried, inevitable, death given form.

Coroban was still shouting, body shaking as though the storm charge were flowing through him. Sigismund felt something shift inside him, something that let him move his limbs. He yanked Coroban's arm.

'Run!' he shouted. Coroban's eyes were locked on the giant in the storm. Sigismund yanked his arm again. 'Run! Go after the others and keep running!'

Coroban's eyes focused.

'You–' he began.

'I can't run. It wants a life. I will stand. You run, run and keep the rest alive.'

'You can't–'

'Go!' Sigismund shouted, and shoved the big youth. Coroban barely moved, but his eyes met Sigismund's and he nodded; and then he was running, trailing his own blood into the mud.

Sigismund turned to face Death. It was almost on him. He noticed the lightning bolts set on its chest. Lightning bolts and a bird head with a hooked beak.

He tried to hold himself still. The pain in his limbs was distant now, not gone but unimportant, discarded in the mud.

Death took a last step and stopped in front of him. A buzzing purr vibrated from the giant. Sigismund could feel an ache in his teeth and eyes. Slowly, he tried to raise the crude metal bar that was his weapon. Death tilted its head, and then a growl filled the air. It took a moment for Sigismund to

understand that the sound was a chuckle.

Light suddenly filled Sigismund's world. Noise hammered him, and for an instant he thought that this spectre had called the storm down on him. Then the flying machine came in low, white light stabbing down from its nose, the rain shredding into mist in the downdraught from its engines. It hung above them, as Death looked at Sigismund.

'We have come for you,' it said.

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